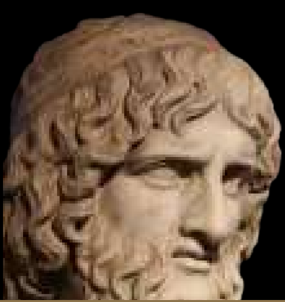
ALL ABOUT HISTORY

NEW

ANCIENT GODS



DISCOVER THE POWERFUL AND MYSTERIOUS DEITIES OF THE PAST

Why did the ancient Greeks believe that their god Pan was dead?

Digital Edition

FUTURE

THIRD EDITION

PLUS: MEET THE 10 STRANGEST GODS OF ANTIQUITY

ANCIENT GODS

Who were the gods of the ancients? Some of them are still familiar figures today: the well-known gods of Egypt, Greece and Rome have long outlived the worshippers that built their great temples; the gods of Scandinavia have built an unexpectedly lucrative movie career. But what about some of the others? The ancient world was packed with incredible, powerful, and strange deities. They were patrons of all sorts of things, from weather and crops to objects and concepts – if you can think of it, it's highly likely that somewhere had a god whose job it was to look after it. There were gods whose legends spread from place to place and gods whose worship never left their native lands, although it's surprising to see quite how many disparate places shared similar ideas about how abstracts like love and war should be represented, and by whom. There are gods whose worship has died out entirely and gods that we still invoke in everyday language. In this bookazine we explore the myths of some of those ancient gods, and their personalities, functions, sacred stories and worship.

FUTURE

ANCIENT GODS

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Cover images
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Photography
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Printed by William Gibbons, 26 Planetary Road,
Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 3XT

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9001

Ancient Gods Third Edition (AHB4464)
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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

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Part of the
ALL ABOUT HISTORY
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HISTORY OF THE GODS

HUMANITY HAS BEEN ENTWINED WITH ITS GODS FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES – THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT THE DIVINE TELL US MUCH ABOUT OURSELVES

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

Whatever your view of religion, it is impossible to deny the power of the divine in human history. In the earliest written texts of the Sumerians from over 3000 BCE the gods spring out fully formed. Even before the invention of writing, then, humans had been worshipping a variety of deities, and as soon as they were able to they wrote about them. Of the gods that existed before written accounts, all we are left with is a handful of haunting images of lost gods that archaeologists pull from the ground.

It is sometimes easy to mock the ancient gods. For early Christian authors they were small things. "Who needs a god of hinges?" Saint Augustine asked Romans who prayed to Cardea. When even a scratch could cause a deadly infection, though, no god was left unvenerated if they could offer salvation. Even today there is an emotional pull to many ancient gods that satisfy a need that pure reason cannot fill. Their stories entertain us and tell us deep secrets about human nature. There are even those who still worship ancient pantheons.

For those who utterly reject belief in ancient gods it can be startling to discover just how ubiquitous they are even in the modern world. Most modern religions incorporated tales or ideas generated by early faiths, but even atheists cannot escape the faiths of their forefathers. You might not go to church but Christmas still comes once a year and with it the echoes of Yule and Saturnalia.

Those seeking access to the old gods without having to wade through arcane texts written in dead languages are in luck. A trip to the cinema will bring you face-to-face with Thor, while a plethora of deities have been revived on the small screen in *American Gods*. Old gods never really die; they only wait to be awoken in a new time.

Timeline: A history of the gods

38,000 BCE

Lion (wo)Man
Discovered in a cave in Germany this statue of a half-lion, half-human is the earliest known example of figurative art. The Löwenmensch figurine is carved from mammoth ivory and may represent an early spirit or deity.

9000 BCE

The first temple?
Around 9,000 years ago at Gobekli Tepe in Turkey, hunter-gatherers came together to erect one of the world's first religious monuments. For around 2,000 years the site was used and added to before being abandoned and deliberately buried.

3000 BCE

Sumerians write it down
We know complex religions existed before the invention of writing because as soon as the Sumerians created cuneiform they wrote down stories of deities as elaborate as any that would come later.

2400 BCE

Pyramid Texts
In Egyptian pyramids, long spells and rituals were carved into the walls. Their aim was to guide the spirit of the dead to the afterlife – avoiding the pitfalls waiting for the unwary – and join them with the gods.

1500 BCE

The Vedas
The Hindu Vedas are the oldest religious texts still in use today. At first transmitted orally, they contain hymns to the Hindu gods, chants, and ritual formulas. The gods described are still held sacred today.

1351 BCE

Akhenaten goes it alone
The ancient Egyptians recognised a huge number of gods in their pantheon. One pharaoh, Amenhotep IV, broke with this tradition. Renaming himself Akhenaten he imposed the worship of a single god, Aten, on his people and disbanded the priesthoods.

1200 BCE

Olmecs get big headed
The first of the great civilisations of Mesoamerica, the Olmecs have left no direct accounts of their religion. Huge pyramids and temples stand as evidence of their faith – as do massive black basalt heads weighing up to 50 tons.

700 BCE

First Greek temple
The religion of ancient Greece was one of the foundations that tied the Greeks together. The temple of Poseidon at the isthmus of Corinth was the first temple built in the style that would soon define Greek architecture.

5th century BCE

Coming of the Celts
The tribes of people commonly called Celts originated in central Europe but spread throughout western Europe. As they migrated they took their gods. In many places, for over a millennium the Celtic deities ruled supreme.

381 CE

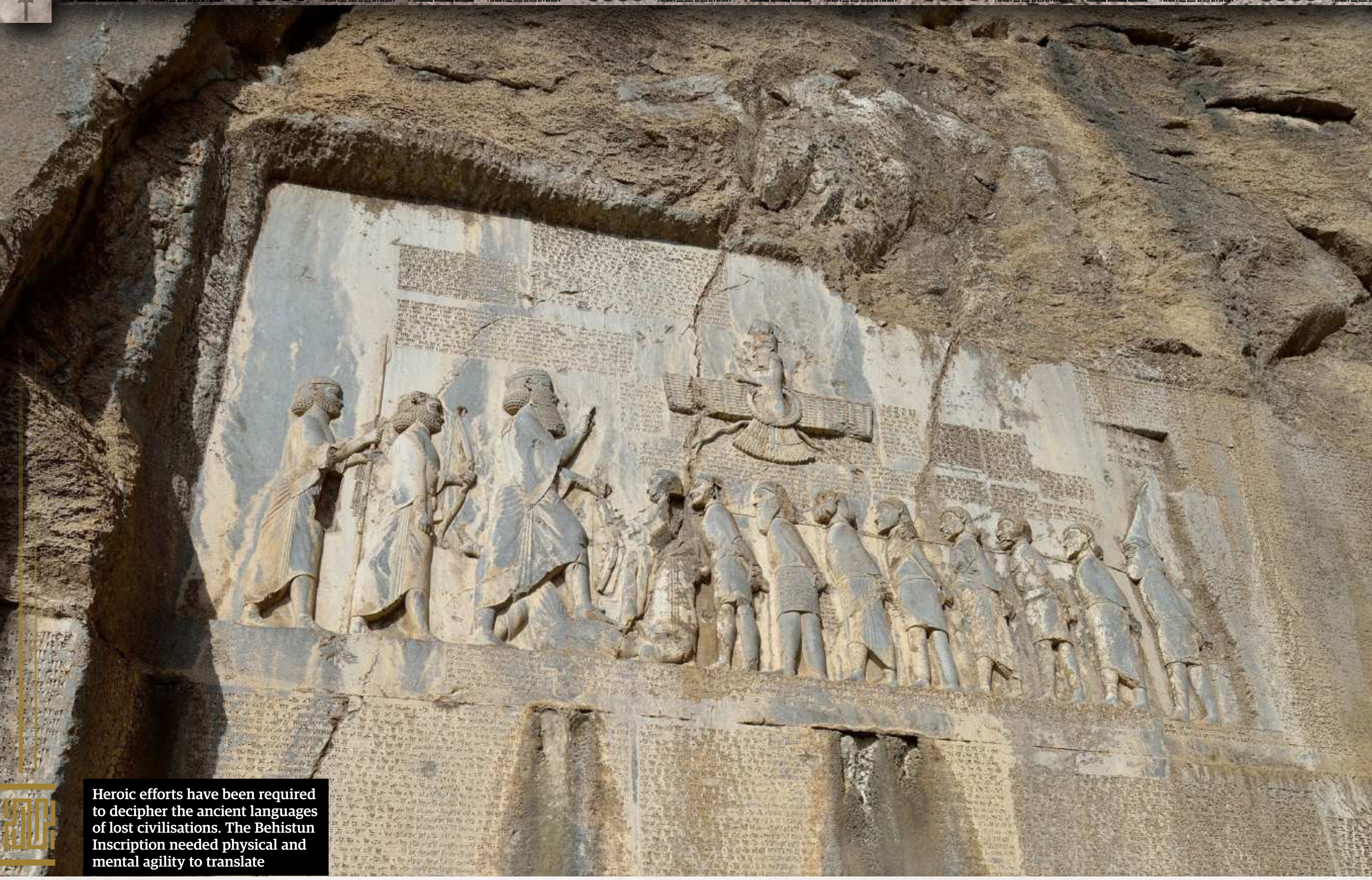
Theodosius ends paganism
With the coming of Christian Roman emperors, the age of paganism was doomed. Theodosius I passed draconian laws against pagan practice, threw out the Vestal Virgins, and destroyed temples. Pagan worship, even in private, could be punished with death.

13th century CE

Norse mythology is written
Vikings carried more than warriors on their longships – they also spread their gods. Even after their conversion to Christianity their stories lingered. Written down in 13th century Iceland, many otherwise lost gods were saved from oblivion.

1870s

Gilgamesh makes a splash
In the 1870s George Smith translated part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for the first time. At a time when the stories in the Book of Genesis were treated as the gospel truth he revealed a story of a universal flood that pre-dated that of Noah.



Heroic efforts have been required to decipher the ancient languages of lost civilisations. The Behistun Inscription needed physical and mental agility to translate

DIGGING FOR DEITIES

When a religion dies out it can be hard to reconstruct it, but through the work of archaeologists many faiths are emerging from the dust

Until relatively recently, many of the ancient religions of the world were lost and forgotten. References in classical texts might give a hint of the pantheons but often these were skewed by the views of their authors. Herodotus claimed to have heard about Egyptian gods from priests but then described them as if they were Greek deities. The voices of the priests themselves were silenced. All that changed in the 19th century.

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Napoleon's soldiers in 1799 gave us a direct view into ancient Egypt. On this stone is written the same inscription in three languages: Greek, Demotic, and Hieroglyphic. With Greek well understood and Demotic translated, it was possible for scholars to work out how to read hieroglyphics. Thousands of inscriptions suddenly became clear, and from the walls of tombs and temples poured forth a wealth of information about the Egyptian gods.

In the middle of the 19th century, archaeologists in Mesopotamia stumbled on caches of baked clay tablets covered in myriad tiny marks called cuneiform. This script was well known from across the Middle East but was no less bewildering for its profusion. To learn what was in the texts required mental and physical leaps. At Behistun in Iran there is a monumental carving of the Babylonian king Darius the Great triumphing over conquered people and rivals to his throne. Around these images are laudatory inscriptions in Babylonian cuneiform – but also copied in Old Persian and Elamite.

Sir Henry Rawlinson, a young army officer, climbed the sheer cliff to the inscription and began the painstaking task of translating the section in Old Persian. When this was complete he used lashed-together ladders and ropes to reach the texts in other languages and, by comparison with the Persian portions, unravelled the mysteries of cuneiform. The ancient libraries of Mesopotamia suddenly became legible.

From the clay tablets, amongst the oldest written texts in the world, would spring hundreds of stories about gods that had either been previously unknown or badly garbled by outsiders. The Old Testament of the Bible records many interactions between the Israelites and pagan peoples. Often the pagan gods come out the worst for their interaction with the Jewish god, as when he took on the priests of Ba'al.

The prophet Elijah challenged the priests of these two gods to a religious showdown. The priests of Ba'al are told to make a pyre of wood ignite through prayer alone. The priests dance and cut themselves but no fire comes. Of course when Elijah tries it, fire falls from the sky immediately. Elijah had the priests put to death.

Who was Ba'al? If we had only the Bible as a source we might know nothing much about him. Beelzebub, a Christian demon, is derived from Ba'al Zebub – Lord of the Flies. Yet after the deciphering of cuneiform we learned that Ba'al was a title of respect given to many gods in the Babylonian pantheon. Eventually Ba'al became the name of a distinct god found throughout the Near East.

In Carthage, Ba'al Hammon was the chief god of the city. According to Greco-Roman sources

> “THE COMPLEX OF STONES AT GOBEKLI TEPE IS OFTEN CALLED THE OLDEST TEMPLE IN THE WORLD”

one of the ways he was worshipped was by the Carthaginians tossing their infant children into fires at his temple. For centuries this was dismissed as propaganda used to blacken an enemy's reputation – like WWI stories of the ‘Huns’ bayoneting babies. Yet recent archaeology suggests children really were sacrificed. At sites known as tophets the cremated remains of children only a few weeks old have been found, with inscriptions from parents about being blessed by Ba’al, and animal sacrifices are found in among the buried children.

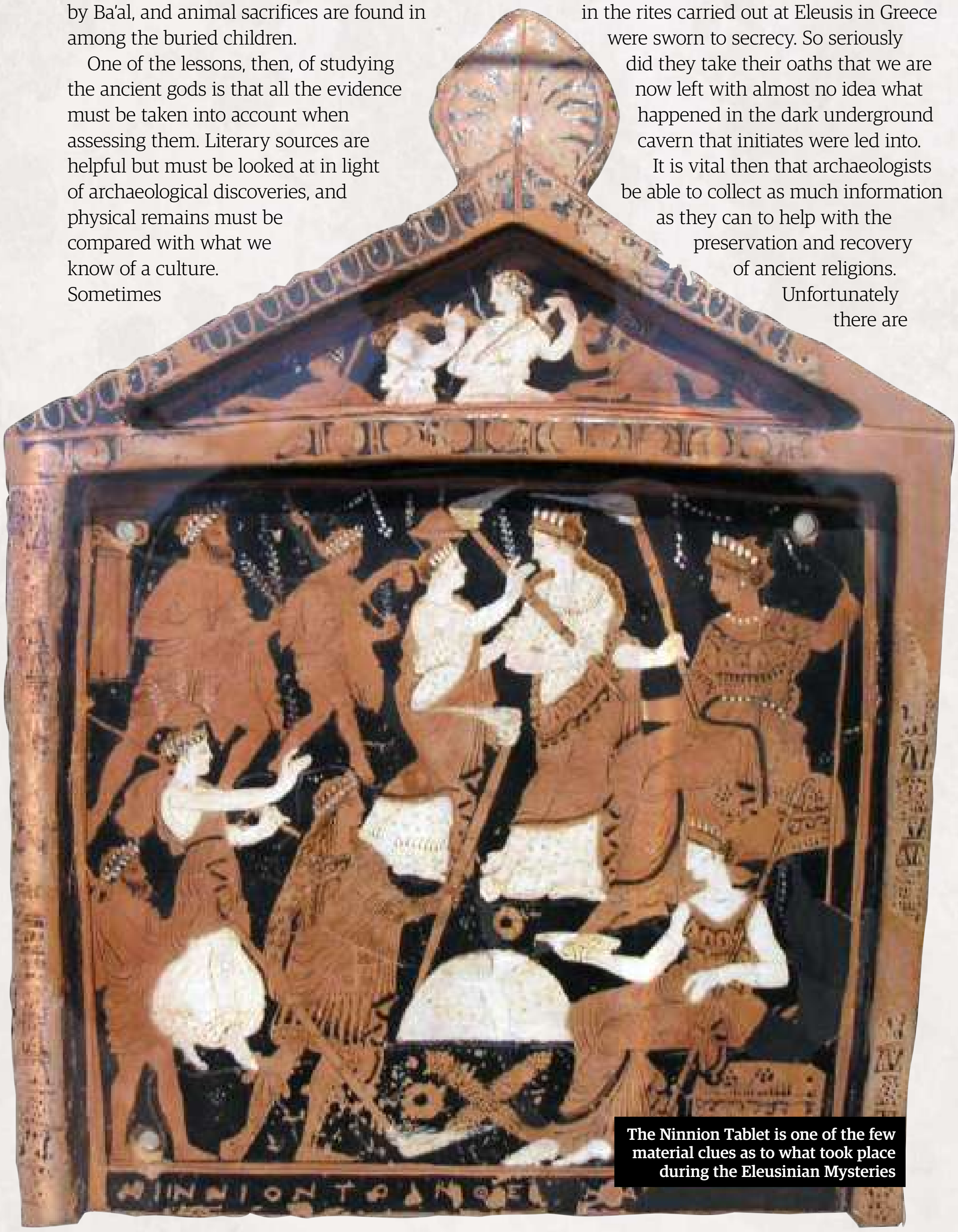
One of the lessons, then, of studying the ancient gods is that all the evidence must be taken into account when assessing them. Literary sources are helpful but must be looked at in light of archaeological discoveries, and physical remains must be compared with what we know of a culture. Sometimes there are no literary remains, however, and all we are left with are tantalising clues.

The complex of stones at Gobekli Tepe is often called the oldest temple in the world. The carved standing stones suggest worship, and the melding of the human world with a transcendent one of spirits but, predating writing as it does, by around 6,000 years, we have no evidence of what went on at the site. Even (relatively) recent religions can be shrouded in mystery. Those who took part in the rites carried out at Eleusis in Greece were sworn to secrecy. So seriously did they take their oaths that we are now left with almost no idea what happened in the dark underground cavern that initiates were led into.

It is vital then that archaeologists be able to collect as much information as they can to help with the preservation and recovery of ancient religions. Unfortunately there are those who have destroyed our shared past for various reasons.

For centuries people have been collecting ancient artefacts for their museums or private collections. The prices raised by statues of the gods has led to some unscrupulous practices with illicit diggers robbing archaeological sites. As in so many things, context is king, and an object removed from the environment it was discovered in loses much of its true value as a way of learning about the past.

Worse are those who for ideological reasons seek to deliberately obliterate the old religions. With the rise of Islamic State came a wave of destruction that cost not only human life, but humanity's history too. Old temples were dynamited, sculptures shattered, and invaluable clues to ancient faiths scrubbed out in the name of worshipping their own god. Who knows how many gods have been silenced forever by such mindless atrocities? How many times has this happened in history before?



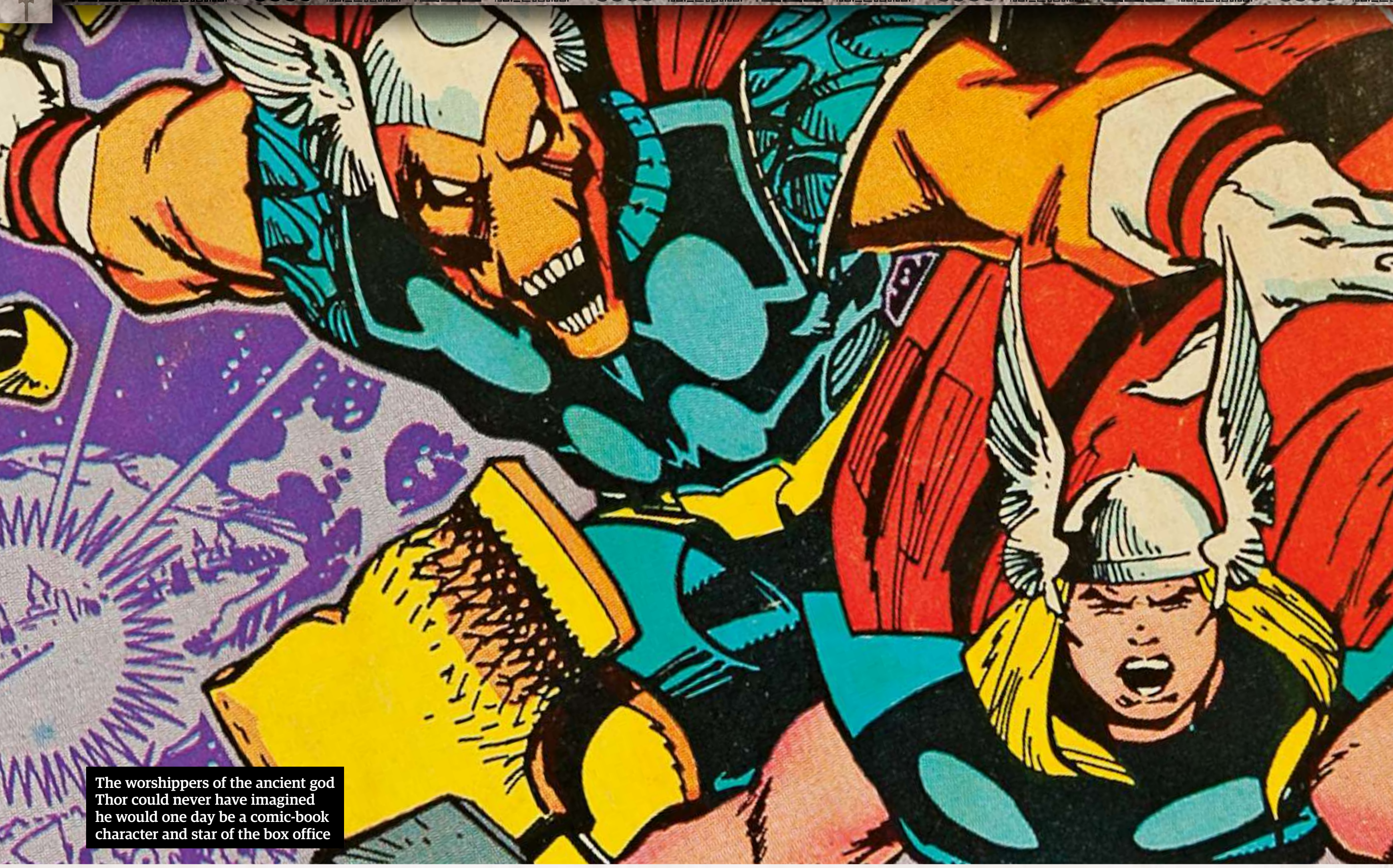
The Ninnion Tablet is one of the few material clues as to what took place during the Eleusinian Mysteries

UNDERGROUND CULTS

Across the Roman world, strange underground temples have been discovered dedicated to the little-known god Mithras. Part of the reason Mithras is so little known is because members of his cult were sworn to secrecy about his worship. To reconstruct what took place in his cave-like temples historians must rely on the scant clues left in archaeological record.

A Mithraeum temple mostly follows exactly the same layout. Usually Mithraea were created from existing caves or constructed so as to look like caverns with a single entrance leading into a long chamber that ends with an altar or stone relief. Along the sides of the chamber are two banks of seats. The most striking feature is the carved image of Mithras found at the heart of every temple. Known as the Tauroctony – the Bull Slaying – it features Mithras pinning a bull and pulling its head back to slit the animal's throat.

The confined space within these temples tells us that bull slaying was not actually practical within them. It may be the tauroctony was held up as a remembrance of one of Mithras’ acts. Other sculptures hint at how Mithras-worshippers saw the universe, but some of the symbols employed will always remain obscure.



The worshippers of the ancient god Thor could never have imagined he would one day be a comic-book character and star of the box office

THE LONG REACH OF OLD GODS

Some gods, or echoes of their followers' traditions, are still with us thousands of years later

While many religions have viewed the divine as standing outside of the universe, and so immune from change, it cannot be argued that gods do not evolve. Our ideas about deities can alter radically as society adapts to radically new situations. Wherever humans go they take their gods, and humans have gone in many strange directions.

Some of the ways that humans have used gods are trivial, but even they can have unintended consequences. The Egyptian goddess Isis was widely worshipped in the Mediterranean before falling out of fashion with the coming of Christianity. Yet recent decades saw her revival, when Isis was adopted as a girl's name in several countries. Until 2014 the name was a mildly popular, if still unconventional, one. That changed with the rise of the terrorist group Islamic State, widely known as ISIS. Suddenly 'Isis' lost its mystical connotations.

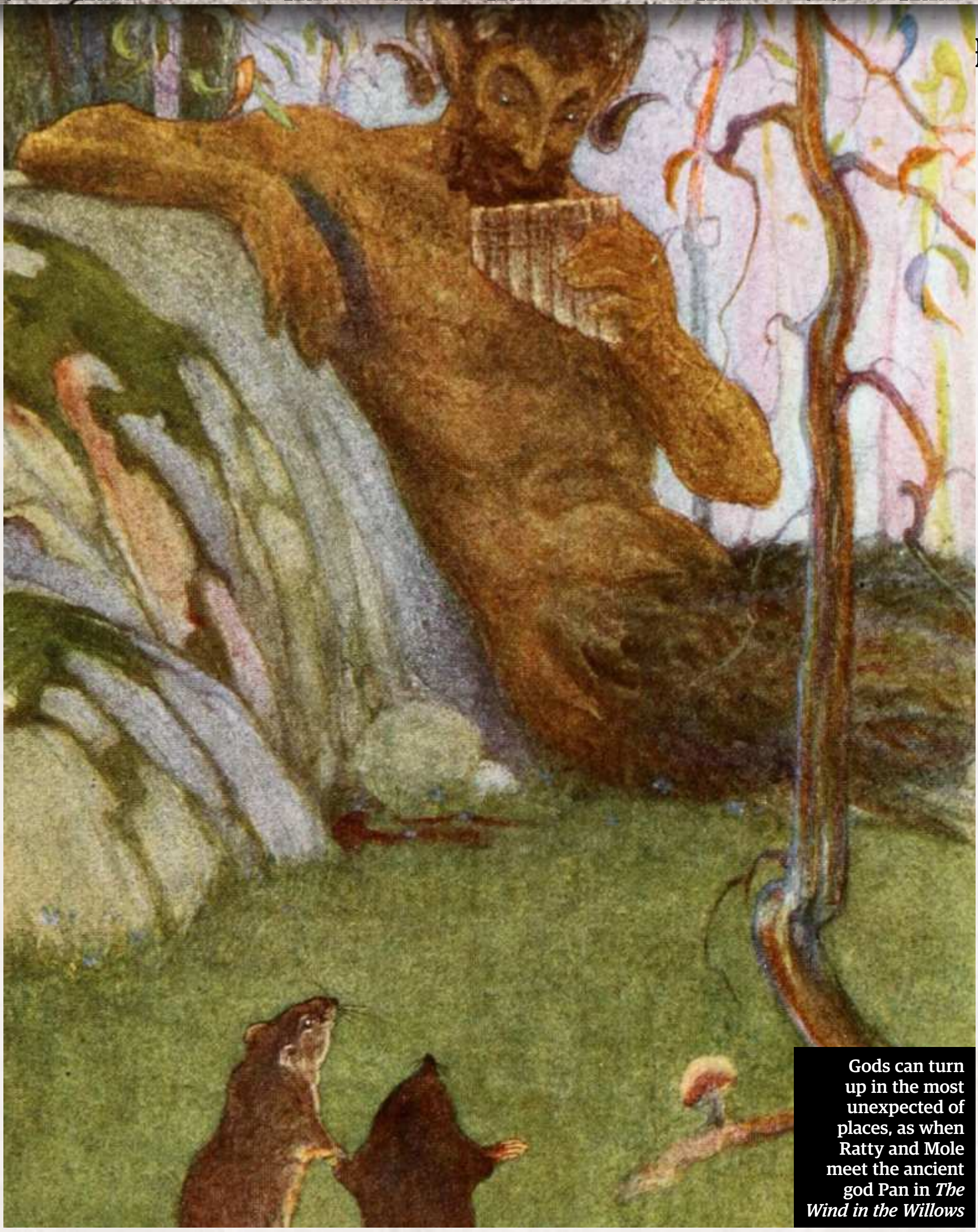
No ancient Isis-worshipper or modern parent could have predicted the rise of a homophonic, barbarous extremist sect. There are more subtle ways in which ancient religions have shaped the modern world. Many of the standard holidays (holy-days) of our modern year can be traced back to ancient religious practices.

Saturnalia was the Roman festival held towards the end of December, which honoured the god Saturn. In Roman myth the age when Saturn ruled the world was a golden one that was looked back on fondly. During the festivities of Saturnalia every attempt to resurrect this time was made. The historian Justinus says that "at the Saturnalia slaves should everywhere sit down with their masters at the entertainments, the rank of all being made equal". People wore colourful clothes, gambled, and exchanged gifts as the winter solstice approached.

Saturnalia was an empire-wide event. Wherever the Romans went the festival went with them. The Romans were also fond of syncretising their faith with the beliefs of their subjects. Saturnalia could be linked to whatever solstice events a subject people had traditionally observed. When paganism began to fall away in the face of Christianity, many still celebrated the end of the year with Saturnalia-style revelry.

The gospels do not record the date of Jesus' birth and there was much debate as to when, or indeed if, the birthday of Christ should be celebrated. Perhaps as a rival event to the pagan Saturnalia, in the 4th century CE Pope Julius I set the date of Christmas to coincide with the Roman winter solstice on 25 December.

Our modern Christmas celebrations may therefore take some inspiration from the pagan Saturnalia, but cultures do not arise in a vacuum. People mix and customs are transferred between groups. From Germanic paganism came many rituals associated with their winter celebrations of Yule. Drinking, raucous carolling, burning a Yule log, and feasting all became incorporated into our now traditional Christmas.



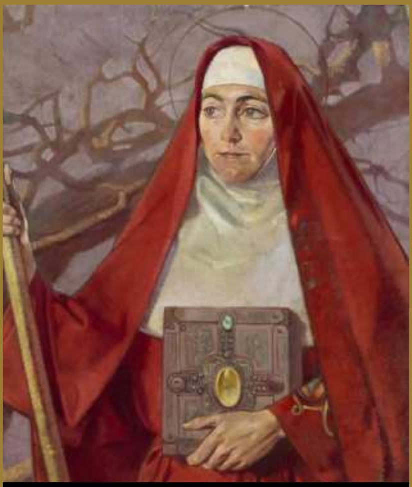
Gods can turn up in the most unexpected of places, as when Ratty and Mole meet the ancient god Pan in *The Wind in the Willows*

ST BRIGID – CELTIC GODDESS

St Brigid, one of the patron saints of Ireland, is not the sort of person one would associate with pagan religion. A holy nun born in the 5th century, she was notoriously charitable, and miraculous events followed her throughout her life. When a pagan attempted to feed the infant Brigid the child rejected the impure milk, but a mysterious cow appeared to feed her (presumably pure) milk. It was Brigid who is said to have helped found monasticism in Ireland. That is, if she ever existed.

St Brigid shares an uncanny number of similarities to an ancient Celtic goddess who also happens to be called Brigid. Both are associated with holy wells. Both are celebrated on 1 February: St Brigid on her feast day, and Brigid at Imbolc, the pagan spring festival.

If there was a real person called Brigid, it seems that aspects of the Celtic goddess were grafted onto her story. This process, known as syncretism, would have helped make the Christian faith more acceptable to the pagans of Ireland, by offering them continuity of worship and a familiar figure. Today, many people are able to worship Brigid in both of her roles of saint and goddess, celebrating her as an icon of female strength.



St Brigid is to be found in many churches across the world today but may have begun as a goddess of an entirely different faith

Christmas today is in many ways a secular event that marks the end of one year and the beginning of the next. Even the most sacred of items can transition into a mere valued object. During the Renaissance, thousands of moneyed individuals competed in the collecting of classical statues for their homes and gardens. Gods of great and terrible power became decorative items. By the 18th century, the austere white of classical statuary had become a byword for elegance. In fact, in the ancient world, statues of Greek and Roman gods were vividly, if not garishly, painted. This is an example of accidentally imbuing an aspect of ancient religion with meaning that it cannot bear.

The old gods have been repackaged many times for new audiences, then, but none more profitably than in the modern age, for dramatic retellings. Altering a myth about the gods and presenting it for public consumption is nothing new. The dramatists of ancient Athens very rarely put on entirely new plays but instead told familiar tales in fresh ways to entertain and engage the crowd. Today the gods are less likely to be found in the theatre though - they dominate the bookshop and the cinema instead.

The taste for novels using ancient religions began in the 19th century. *Eric Brighteyes* by H Rider Haggard in 1890 introduced readers to the Norse world of 10th century Iceland, full of witches and gods. *Eight Days of Luke* brought Norse deities to the modern world and acquainted many young readers with the delights of the trickster Loki. Other authors were eclectic in their borrowings. *The Dark is Rising* novels of Susan Cooper took much from folklore and mythology to create a tale of light versus dark.

Perhaps the greatest use of ancient religion in fiction is in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. An exploration of old gods in new places, it sees the struggle of deities to stay relevant in a world that has moved on. Everyone from Odin to Thoth to Eostre appears in its pages as the forgotten gods fight the growing might of new deities like Technology and Globalisation.

Greek and Roman mythology had inspired Western art since the Renaissance, but in the 20th and 21st century it was used by authors, particularly of children's books, to spin exciting stories. Thor, Loki, and others in the Norse pantheon became staples of Marvel comic books, where the god of thunder could be found battling everything from trolls to supervillains from outer space. In his cinematic guise, one of Thor's greatest battles has been with keeping his shirt on.

How we depict the gods tells us a great deal about how we view the cultures they originate from. With Thor we see the Norse in the mould of Viking warriors, all manly action and muscle. For art collectors on the Grand Tour of Europe, classical sculpture was pure, white, and orderly. The ways we choose to appropriate ancient gods is often more about what we need than about what ancient believers thought.

THE ANCIENT GODS TODAY

From archaeologists to storytellers to today's new followers, the ancient gods are still called upon

In the *Percy Jackson* novels, a series of young adult books that use and retell Greek and Roman myths, the gods are seen as powerful and aloof, with their own motivations. Yet they are also used as a source of inspiration. It is revealed that the hero Percy, named for Perseus, is the son of a god. He is also said to suffer from dyslexia, as many demigods apparently do. They find it a struggle to read a language other than ancient Greek because of their divine Greek heritage. Religions can help to make us feel special.

For the ancient Greeks, the gods helped to make sense of the universe. They represented abstract notions like war, wisdom, and health in a time when things we take for granted were not well understood. With the advent of the scientific world-view the gods no longer guard the unguessed at gaps in out knowledge. Those who wish to use the gods must find new ways to make them relevant. Luckily each generation can find in old gods what they need.

Before looking at modern worshippers of ancient gods, it is useful to remember how important studying religions is for understanding the past. It has been said that if you asked an ancient Egyptian to explain their religion they would not understand what you meant. It was impossible to the ancient mind to separate the divine from the mundane. Every aspect of their lives would have involved some god or other. Every major life event, from conception to death and rebirth in the afterlife, was governed by some member of the pantheon. It would be like asking a physicist to disentangle their understanding of the world from equations.

Being able to enter the mindset of the ancient world is vital for anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists. As well as revealing much in itself about ancient people, studying comparative ancient religions can reveal otherwise unknown transmissions of ideas between cultures. Many polytheistic faiths were willing to incorporate new gods into their pantheon. By studying the myths, legends, and temples of the ancient world you can see how a god such as the Sumerian Inanna could influence ideas about Venus in the West and Durga in the East.

People in the ancient world gave offerings to the gods. Huge altars of marble, golden tripods, statues, and vast inscriptions have been left by nobles and monarchs. These are all important, but even the most humble gifts can be interesting to archaeologists. At Roman sites of worship, clay models of a body part were left by those praying to be healed. By studying the arms, legs, and wombs left as votive offerings historians can get hints of what health problems were common in the ancient world. Inscriptions left with offerings can allow voices from otherwise unknown people to speak across the ages. Without an offering to Aesculapius we would never otherwise have known that Titus Iulius Genesiacus and Caecilia Balbilla had a successful bean trade.

Not all gods remain dead, as new followers like this druid at Stonehenge may always appear

ÁSATRÚ – NORSE GODS REBORN

Iceland is fertile ground for the human imagination. With its wild and uninhabited areas it is easy to conjure up spirits everywhere. In fact many modern Icelanders do strongly believe that elves and other forces dwell on their island. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the Norse gods of their Viking forebears are undergoing a rebirth today.

Ásatrú, the name for the reborn Norse faith, is Iceland's fastest growing religion. Since 1973 it has been officially recognised by the state and so licenced to perform weddings. Despite the opposition of some Christian bishops, Ásatrú has established itself on Iceland and for the first time in 1,000 years the Norse gods are being celebrated again.

At present there is no temple for followers of Ásatrú to congregate at, but one is under construction and due to be completed by the end of 2019. The hall, called a hof, is being built to line up with astronomical events at certain times of the year, just as many ancient monuments were. Once finished, the hall will serve as a space for Ásatrú services, and the Norse gods will finally have a permanent home after a millennium in the wilderness.

At the moment Norse worship in Iceland has no home - but a new temple being built will change that

“STUDYING COMPARATIVE ANCIENT RELIGIONS CAN REVEAL OTHERWISE UNKNOWN TRANSMISSIONS OF IDEAS”

Even without getting their tools dirty, scholars are able to discern a great deal about ancient cultures. By comparing the myths and legends from old religions they are able to map the changes that tales have undergone with time and transmission, and home in on what the original stories may have been. By studying these lineages a Proto-Indo-European mythology has been uncovered and some of its details revealed.

According to experts, the group of people who gave rise to many of the cultures of India and Europe worshipped a father god known as Dyeus Phater. This king of the gods would eventually be metamorphosed into Zeus, Jupiter, and Dyaus Pitar, who all bear a striking resemblance to each other. While many reconstructions of Proto-Indo-European religion differ markedly, it is a fruitful reminder of our common ancestry.

Yet ancient religions are not just curiosities for those with a scholarly interest. Nor are they only used by those spinning fictional yarns. Many people feel an emotional or spiritual tug towards the gods of yesterday. When naming a grand project, people often turn to the name of an ancient deity, as it lends a sense of grandeur and seems to place them beyond the petty concerns of the day. The Apollo missions by any other name would have still reached the Moon, but would not have sounded so sweet.

Some people feel so connected to the gods of the distant past that they have begun to worship them anew. Pagans can be found today in many countries. In Iceland they are building the first temple to be raised to the Norse gods in a thousand years. In Greece the Hellenic gods are again having their hymns sung to them. For these new Pagans, the study of ancient religion is not merely a dry academic pursuit but a faith as living and real as any. While some Pagans attempt to revive specific ancient pantheons, others are happy to utilise stories and gods from a number of cultures to construct their own eclectic belief system. If a myth - say Zeus giving birth to Athena from his head or Odin trading an eye for wisdom - still holds some essential truth for them, then they use it.

Some groups that have long been oppressed have found new confidence in reinterpreting old religions. When the Roman emperor Hadrian's young lover Antinous died he decreed that Antinous should be worshipped as a god. Today a small section of the LGBT community has taken the divine Antinous up as a symbol of their struggles for equality.

Some may see modern use of ancient gods as a debasement of them, but this is to look on the ancient world from just our present position. There never was a unified, static set of beliefs in any ancient culture, as they were living faiths that often evolved over millennia. How we use the ancient gods is just the latest chapter in a story that may be neverending. Perhaps the ancient gods really are immortal.

The myths and legends of Ancient Greece are today being used to resurrect a religion not practised for nearly 2,000 years

THE SUMERIAN PANTHEON

IN ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS, GODS OF GREAT AND TERRIBLE POWER EMERGED TO RULE THE FIRST CITIES

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

The first writing system that we know of was developed by the Sumerians around 3400 BCE. When archaeologists first dug down into the mounds that cover Sumerian cities today in southern Iraq, they emerged with thousands of fragments of clay tablets covered with their cuneiform texts. It took many years to decipher them, but when these writings were finally read, the gods and goddesses of ancient Sumer sprang forth in vivid poems and hymns.

Because the gods feature in the very earliest texts that survive, it seems clear that Sumerian religion predates the invention of writing. There may be other, earlier religions, but the first to have been recorded was that of the Sumerian cities. And the view they give us of their gods and universe still has the power to amaze us today.

COSMOLOGY AND CREATION

In the beginning was the ocean. The Sumerian tablets record tales that describe what happened "In those days, in those distant days, in those nights, in those remote nights, in those years, in those distant years." The primordial salt sea, personified as the goddess Nammu, was all that existed. Some texts would refer to this first goddess as the "mother who gave birth to the heavens and the Earth" and indeed she did give birth to the first gods: An, the sky, and Ki, the earth. In these first days, however, the earth and sky were not separate things, but all mixed together and touching, so nothing could live as it does today. It did, however, give An and Ki the chance to meet and mate, and from their coupling the god of wind, Enlil, was born.

As in many ancient religions, the son of the first god creates trouble for his father. Enlil separates the Earth and sky. The sky he leaves to An, but he takes the Earth for himself, carrying off his mother. Some have suggested that An represents a very early deity, but one that was too remote from humanity to be of much use to his worshippers. This is a motif repeated in many pantheons, where it is the children of the first gods who play a more active role in the world.

An remained a powerful god. His word was universal law and what he said was inviolable. He also distributed powers to the other gods. Yet he lived in the highest dome of the heavens and rarely involved himself with humans. For the Sumerians the world was a disc covered by three stone domes. Later Babylonian texts tell us that the lowest was made of jasper and was the place where the stars lived, the next stone dome was home to the lesser gods, and only the mighty deities resided in the outermost sphere with An. At the east and west of each dome there is a gate guarded by gods, through which Utu the Sun god drives his chariot each morning and evening.

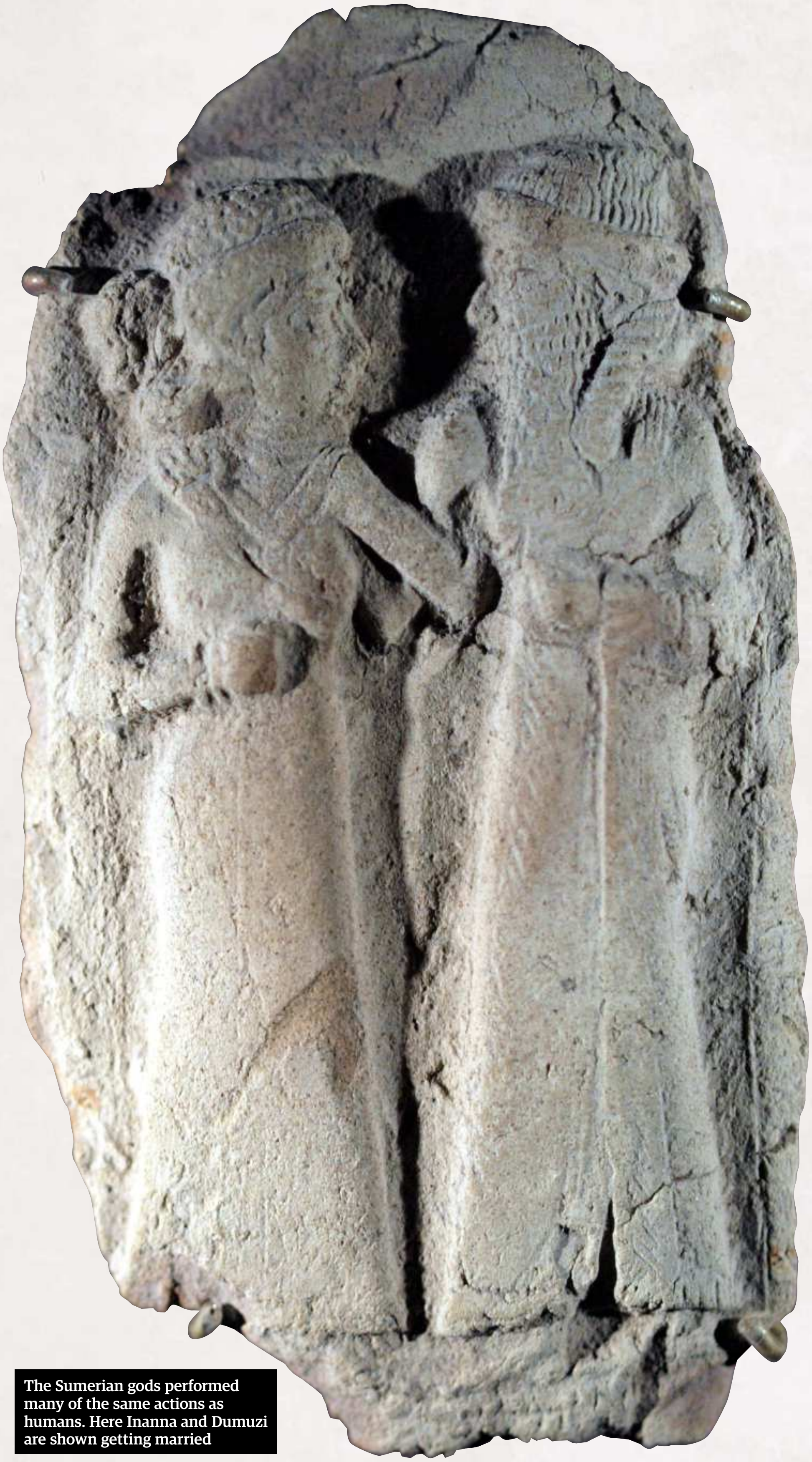
To ensure the gods felt respected people would leave statues of themselves praying in temples to prove their devotion

Yet the universe was still mostly made of water, and An's heavenly dome stopped the waters above from flooding the earth. Babylonian maps show the Earth as a disc surrounded by water. Above the Earth and around it was the original salt sea, but underneath the Earth was a freshwater ocean known as the Abzu. Abzu was originally a god but he was lulled to sleep by the wise god Enki and made to flow peacefully through the irrigation channels that the Mesopotamians relied on make their crops grow.

Enki's wisdom and prowess with magic played a key role in the creation of humanity. In the first days before humans existed:

"When the gods like men
Bore the work and suffered the toll
The toil of the gods was great,
The work was heavy, the distress was much."

An decreed that the gods should have servants to work for them. Enki took the blood of a sacrificed god or demon and mixed it with clay to form the shape of the first humans. Enki joined their souls to their bodies of dust and provided



The Sumerian gods performed many of the same actions as humans. Here Inanna and Dumuzi are shown getting married

While the Sumerian gods can feel very human, there was also something deeply uncanny about them

many gifts that allowed humans to live together in civilisation. He was not above mocking his creations, however. He once produced a useless being - one unable to walk, or talk, or feed itself - and challenged another god to find something useful about it. When they were unable to do so, Enki named the creature 'Baby' and left it to find its own way in the world.

THE PANTHEON

As with many polytheist pantheons, the gods of the Sumerians can seem overwhelming in number. Each god may have many attributes and the areas each deity was responsible for may overlap. As the leader of the assembly of the gods, An was often invoked by rulers to grant them wisdom. Yet a king might also call on the virile Enlil to give him a ruler's strength. Or they may ask the wise Enki to teach them how to lead. Who then is the god of kingship? Our fragmentary evidence leaves us in some doubt, but there are many gods and myths that we can learn about.

An, Enki, and Enlil were considered the central triad of Sumerian gods, but the Sumerians recognised "seven gods who decree" as the most

> "EACH GOD MAY HAVE MANY ATTRIBUTES AND THE AREAS EACH WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAY OVERLAP"

THE UNIVERSAL DELUGE

Mesopotamia literally means 'between rivers' and in the ancient world the Tigris and Euphrates were given to spectacular and devastating floods. It is no surprise then that floods should have seeped into local myths. In Sumerian texts the god Enlil decided to flood the entire earth and wipe out humanity. When the flood narrative was written down by later civilisations, the reason given for this deluge is that humans were too noisy and they disturbed the god's sleep.

In all versions of the tale a hero is chosen to ride out the storm, when the god Enki tells him to build an ark. For the Sumerians this was Ziusudra, to others he was Atrahasis or Ut-napistim. Whatever his name, the hero does as instructed and builds a massive boat as the gods open the dome of heaven and let the surrounding oceans flood in. When the waters recede, the human hero exits his boat and humans are once again allowed to exist.

When the first texts recording this tale were translated in the 19th century they caused a storm among Christians. Some found the idea that some Biblical tales were derivative to be offensive to their faith. Others thought they merely confirmed the accuracy of the story of Noah.

When George Smith translated the Mesopotamian flood myth he controversially redefined the idea of a literally-true Bible

powerful of deities. These were An (the sky), Enki (god of wisdom), Enlil (god of winds and storms), Ninhursag (goddess of the mountains), Nanna (god of the Moon), Utu (god of the Sun), and Inanna (goddess of love and aggression). These gods and goddesses were often paired with their spouses in divine responsibilities.

There are too many divinities to name in one article. Some, like Ninurta, were favourites with the people because they had great deeds to their name. It was Ninurta who fought demonic birds and slew warriors by the score. Others, like the gods of the underworld, Erishkigal and her husband Nergal, were to be feared for their mastery over death and disease. Other gods may have been local and worshipped by only a few.

The gods were much like humans in that they enjoyed marriage, but many myths detail other liaisons that took place. A family tree of the Sumerian gods would be a spider-web of connections, not all of them licit. Sons might sleep with mothers or brothers with sisters. Whoever the parents were, the offspring were always impressive. Most children of gods were gods, but sometimes humans could boast divine lineages. The legendary hero Gilgamesh declared himself to be "two-thirds a god". Many heroes from ancient myth were thought to be at least partly divine.

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

Burials in Sumer from the 4th and 3rd millennium BCE often contain grave goods with the skeletons. The impression given is that the departed will have some need of the food, furniture, and games placed alongside them in the ground. If there is some future use for these items, then you would expect that death was not the end for the Sumerians, and in their myths we do find out where the deceased go. Beneath Abzu was the gloomy abode of the dead known as Kur or Irkalla.

It is easy to forget that the dry bones in museums were once people as full of life as we are now. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the hero's friend Enkidu realises that he is mortal and will soon die. "So now must I become a ghost, to sit with the ghosts of the dead, to see my dear brother nevermore!". Indeed he does die and Gilgamesh mourns for him. It also sparks the realisation that Gilgamesh himself is not immortal, which drives the story thereafter.

"I am going to die! Am I not like Enkidu?
Deep sadness penetrates my core,
I fear death."

He sets out on an adventure to find a way to live forever. From descriptions of the Sumerian underworld it is not hard to see why the idea of going there strikes fear into the heart of even the mightiest warrior.

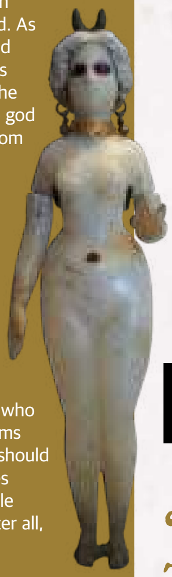
In the poem *Inanna's Descent into the Underworld* the goddess of love and strife makes a visit to the land of the dead. Her sister

THE CHANGING GODS

Inanna, goddess of love and strife, was worshipped from at least 4000 BCE and remained an object of veneration for millennia. Given her record of fickleness it is not surprising that she should have changed over the centuries.

Inanna, or Ishtar as she became known to the Akkadians, was a popular deity in myths because of her combative nature. She features in more surviving tales than any other god. As Ishtar, the Akkadians may have softened Inanna's more outrageous behaviour. As the goddess of war as well as fertility she apparently killed too many men, so the god Ea created a rival goddess of discord from the dirt beneath his fingernails. When Ishtar saw this mockery of her she promised to give up her violent ways.

For the Assyrians under King Ashurbanipal, Ishtar became the chief god in their pantheon. In Canaanite and Phoenician religion Ishtar was assimilated as the goddess Astarte (or Ashtoreth/Asherah). After the Phoenicians introduced Astarte to Cyprus it seems she made her way into the Greek pantheon as Aphrodite, who legend says was born on Cyprus. It seems oddly appropriate the goddess of love should have been so beloved in so many places and so many times. Even her changeable appearance makes sense. Beauty is, after all, in the eye of the beholder.



The goddess of love found in many ancient pantheons can in some cases be traced back to the Sumerian goddess of love and war, Inanna

As well as gods, the Sumerians recognised demons like the monstrous bird-creature Anzu

"SUMERIAN GODS WERE NOT TRANSCENDENT BEINGS… THEY LIVED, MARRIED, BRED… AND EVEN DIED"

Ereshkigal is the goddess who presides over the underworld, and Inanna goes to comfort her on the death of her husband. The gatekeeper warns her that "you travelled to the land of no return". Yet Inanna has left her minister Ninshubur behind in the world of the living to ask the other gods to rescue her if she does not come back. In doing so she gives her instructions for how to mourn her mistress that reveal aspects of Sumerian death rituals.

"*When I have arrived in the underworld* [says Inanna], *make a lament for me on the ruin mounds. Beat the drum for me in the sanctuary. Make the rounds of the houses of the gods for me. Lacerate your eyes for me, lacerate your nose for me. Lacerate your ears for me, in public. In private, lacerate your buttocks for me.*"

Inanna, never a very tactful deity, makes the mistake of sitting on her sister's throne and the judges of the dead turn against her. With a look Inanna "was turned into a corpse. And the corpse was hung on a hook." Inanna was right to fear being trapped in the underworld. As Inanna describes it, the souls of the deceased are "Bereft of light, dust is their fare and clay their food. They reside in darkness and are clothed like birds." Relatives who wanted their loved ones to eat and drink more than dust offered wine at the graves of the dead.

In the myth Inanna is revived by the actions of Enki and allowed to return to the world of the living. She unfortunately finds that her husband Dumuzi is not weeping as he should be for her death, and offers him up in her place to be tormented in hell. The deal is struck and Inanna goes free. Dumuzi would have to wait a while longer for his redemption from the underworld.

THE NATURE OF THE GODS

The gods of the Sumerian pantheon were part of the same universe that humans inhabited. They were not transcendent beings that were inconceivable to human minds. They lived, married, bred, and in some cases even died. For the Sumerians, therefore, the gods were a real factor to be considered in their lives. It is necessary to look at the range of gods included in their religion and how the Sumerians worshipped them to fully understand how Sumerians lived.

The gods in fact were regarded as dwelling on Earth. The Sumerian names for the temples of the gods call the temples 'houses'. In Nippur, Enlil lived in the 'Mountain House' while An and Inanna shared the 'House of Heaven' in Uruk. The earliest temples show a constant rebuilding of the shrines on top of the remains of the last shrine. Many temples remained at ground level but some, over time, developed into mounds with a shrine on top. From these developed the most impressive monuments - the ziggurats.

A ziggurat is a raised series of platforms that towers into the sky. Indeed some people link the raising of ziggurats as the genesis of the Biblical idea of the Tower of Babel, meant to reach all the way to heaven. The ziggurats did raise their priests towards the sky, as on the top platform of the structure would be the temple to a god. The later Babylonian ziggurat to Marduk reached an impressive height of 91m.

Cult statues are known to have existed in later Sumerian temples. These represented the god on Earth, and in some ways the god was thought to exist within the statue. A cult image would be fed, dressed, and put to bed each night. Music and entertainments were used to amuse the god. At special festivities the god could be paraded around the city or even pay visits to other cities.

Sacrifices, the killing of animals, were made for the gods. Finds of massive amounts of burnt fish bones at religious sites suggest the gods had

a special appetite for them. Often sacrifices were made in special rooms or ditched areas slightly away from the temple. Generally the Sumerian gods ate exactly the same food as their human servants. Most food offered at a temple would in practice have been consumed by the priests. Luxuries such as the best meat, cheeses, and beers would all have been appreciated by a deity but they also enjoyed the burning of perfumes and incenses too.

As well as these simple offerings, gifts meant to serve the god or goddess, such as furniture or decorative items, would enter the treasury of the temple. For those who wished to remind the god of their devotion, a statue of the petitioner in the act of prayer could be offered and placed in front of the deity to display eternal devotion. Some of these figures still exist today.

One result of the Sumerian gods living on Earth was that they played a direct role in human affairs. Each city had its own protecting deity. All the gods might be revered in every Sumerian settlement, but one god was thought to dwell literally in every city.

Of the triad of major gods, An lived in Uruk, Enlil lived in Nippur, and Enki made his home in Eridu. Eridu was considered to be the first city ever built and Enki, their patron, was the god who gave them the tools to create a civilisation.

Over time gods could be switched and shifted between cities. An was eventually displaced from his Eanna temple in Uruk by the more active goddess Inanna. Inanna seemed to like taking things from other gods. In one poem she travels to Enki's home city and gets him drunk, so she can steal the divine attributes of civilisation to take them back to her own city of Uruk.

The gods could sometimes be the direct rulers of a city, as at Nippur where the inhabitants boasted that Enlil was their king. Since they had a divine leader they felt they did not require a human one. With cities in Sumer being mostly independent of each other, at least in early times, each city needed to be governed separately. Of course, most gods are considered quite taciturn, and it is left to priests to interpret what it is they may want. In Sumer the priests formed a very powerful group.

The Sumerian title for a king or ruler was 'Lugal' - "Big Man". But the Sumerians recognised a variety of types of leadership. 'Ensi' may have been rulers of a single city while recognising a lugal as their superior. In Lagash the local ensi referred to their patron god Ninurta as their lugal. 'En' leaders began as priests but also played important roles in the economics of a city. Eventually the roles of lugal and en merged, with kingship and priesthood being united in one person. Later Mesopotamian kings would go from merely having a direct line to the divine to being gods incarnate. Even when the phenomenon of god-kings died out in Mesopotamia a whiff of the divine still clung to kingship, as many rulers claimed to be appointed directly by the gods.

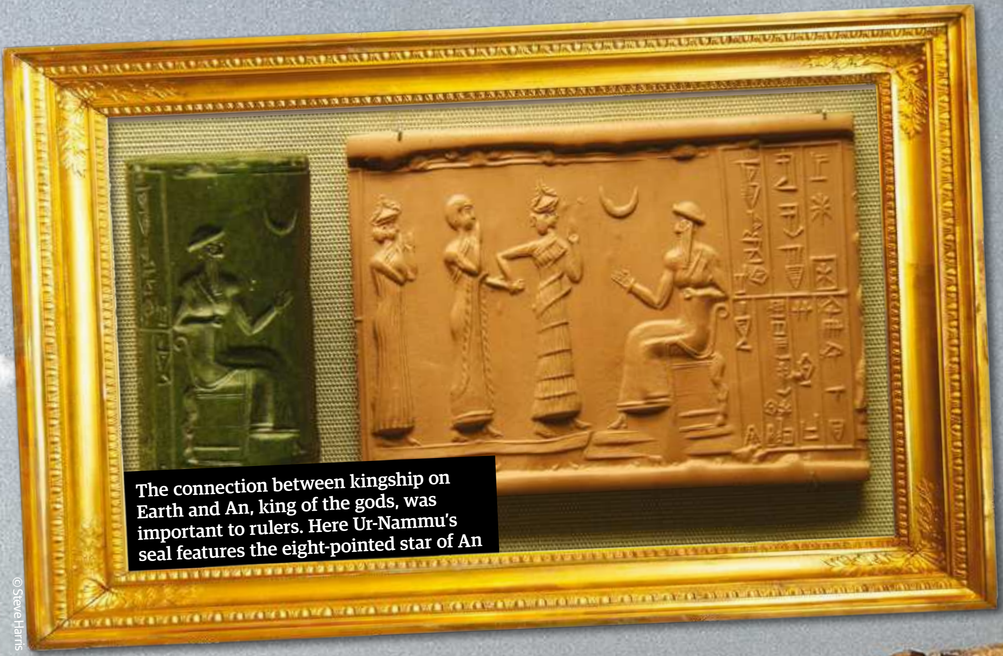
INFLUENCING LATER FAITHS

It is impossible to speak of a definitive Sumerian religion. All things change with time, and religions are not immune to the forces of evolution. The earliest writings may give us clues to what the earliest inhabitants of Sumer believed, but later Sumerians introduced new stories and even new gods to their pantheon. Was the god An the first god to be born, or was he the child of gods? Even the Sumerians did not agree.

It becomes even harder to speak of Mesopotamian religion. When the cities of Sumer were conquered, first by the Akkadians around 2300 BCE and later by others, the Sumerian religion was absorbed and joined with other faiths. Many texts from these later civilisations record stories similar to, but distinct from, the Sumerian originals. Even though Sumerian stopped being a spoken language around 2000 BCE it continued in cuneiform to be used to record religious and ceremonial texts until the 1st century CE. It was still the language of Mesopotamian religion.

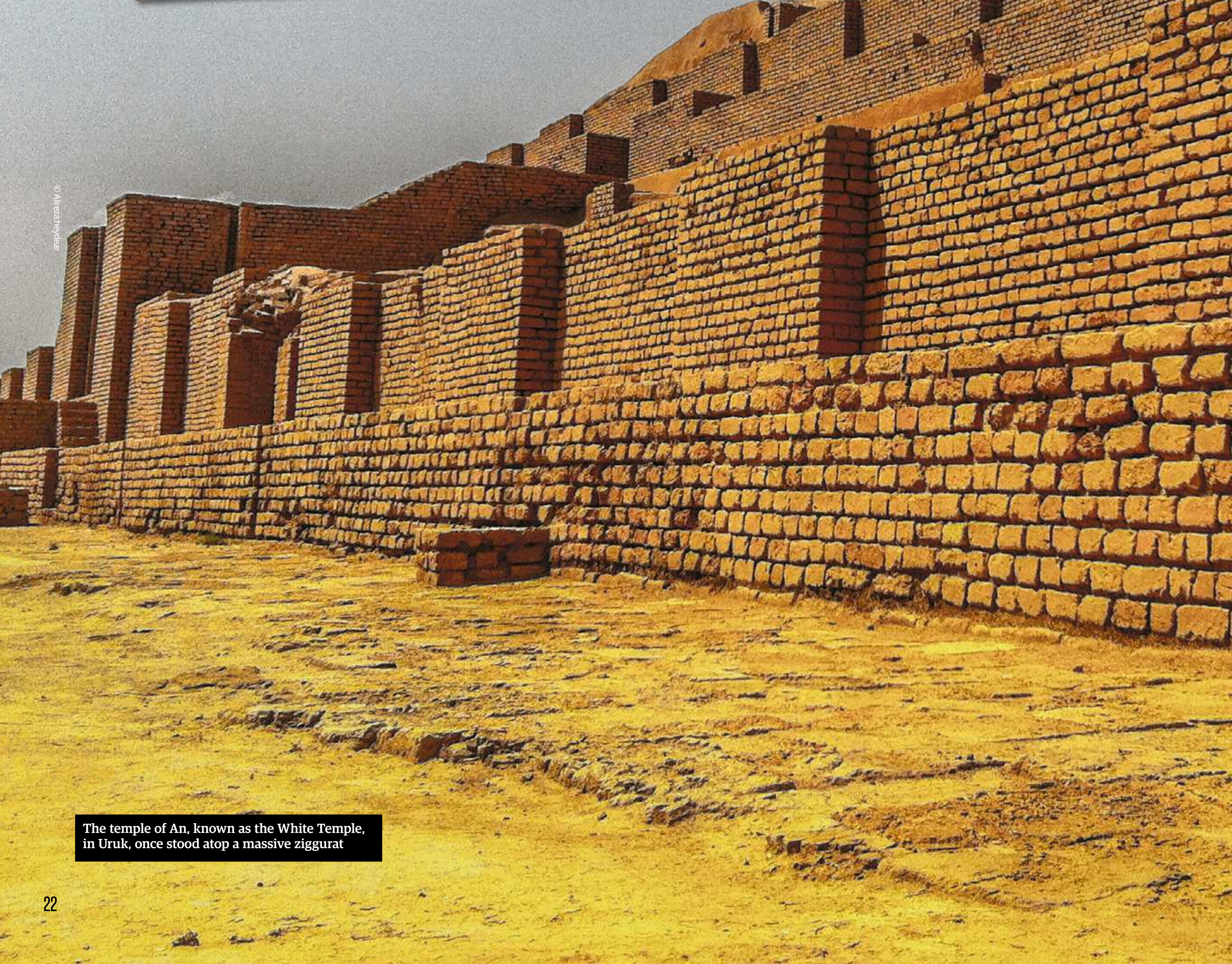
Mesopotamian cultural domination of the region spread their gods to other civilisations. Ishtar, the goddess who developed from Inanna, would later be found in Hittite temples. In the southern Arabian tribes, a triad of gods derived from the Sumerian deities Nanna, Inanna, and Utu were held especially holy. Traces of Sumerian religion are still to be found in the Bible today. The similarities between the Tower of Babel and the ziggurats of Babylon are obvious. The flood myth of Genesis is similar in many ways to the flood recorded in cuneiform texts written millennia before any Biblical book was recorded. The Sumerians may be gone, but the influences of their faith are still being felt today.

Some gods remain mysterious. Nisaba, goddess of writing, was revered in the city of Eresh - but it has never been located



The connection between kingship on Earth and An, king of the gods, was important to rulers. Here Ur-Nammu's seal features the eight-pointed star of An

© Steve Harris



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The temple of An, known as the White Temple, in Uruk, once stood atop a massive ziggurat

AN: LORD OF THE HEAVENS

AN AND KI WERE THE PROGENITORS OF ALL THE SUMERIAN GODS AND CONTROLLED THE HIGHEST SPHERE OF HEAVEN

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

The very earliest Sumerian texts make no reference to where An (or Anu) came from. He is simply assumed to have always been the chief god of the Sumerians. An was so associated with the sky that his name came to be used for it and it is not always clear in sources whether they are referring to the sky or the deity. According to Sumerian myth, the heavens were three stone domes over the top of the world and it is in the outermost, and most beautiful, that An resides.

In later myths An is the son of the primordial sea-goddess Nammu, who also gives birth to a daughter called Ki. While An is the sky, Ki is the Earth. Their child Enlil, god of storms, wind, and rain, separated the sky from the Earth and ruled the Earth thereafter. Ki features very little in Sumerian myth thereafter and no cultic site dedicated to her has ever been discovered. This partitioning of the universe is how An, previously the most powerful of gods, was largely usurped in Sumerian religion by his son. The father of the gods in lots of pantheons is often a distant figure that is mostly removed from the human realm while his more engaging children act on humanity. Images of An are rare or entirely absent from the archaeological evidence, but at certain times of the year in Uruk his statue was carried through the streets by priests who recited incantations. This is one of the few times that An was directly worshipped as, by the time written records began, he was an almost completely absent god. As the father of the gods, An devolved his powers to them. As the goddess Inanna says in one poem, her power comes from An - "An has made me terrifying throughout heaven."

Lipit-Estar, a ruler of the city of Isin, had hymns written to An as "The august lord, pre-eminent, with the most complex divine powers, almighty grandfather of all the lords." Since it was An who ordered the universe it was Anu who placed kings on their thrones and it was worth a ruler's time to keep him happy. As the hymn continues "The words of what An says are firmly established; no god would oppose them." Don't mess with me or An, is Lipit-Estar's implicit message.

ERESHKIGAL AND NERGAL: RULERS OF THE DEAD

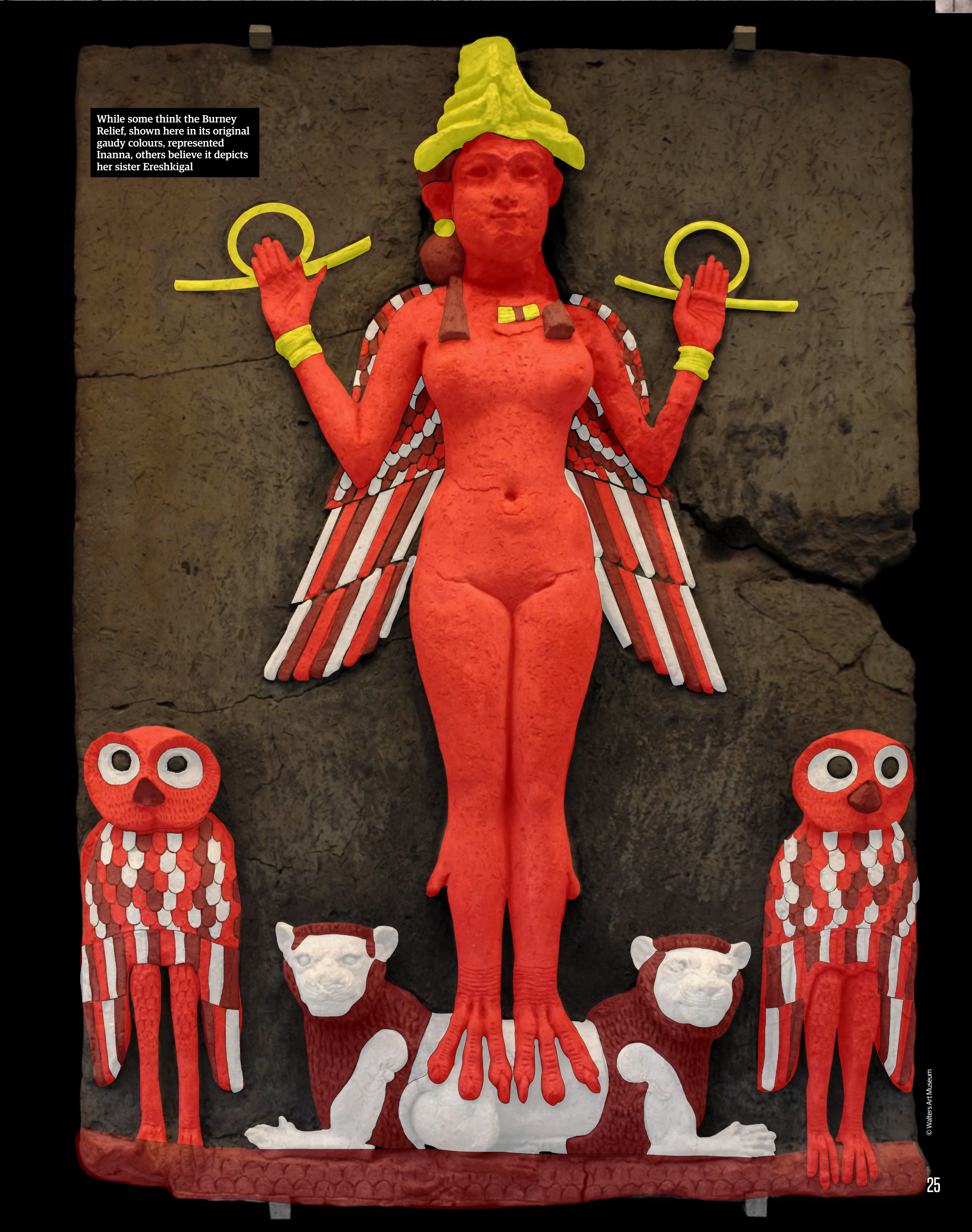
THE SUMERIAN UNDERWORLD WAS RULED BY POWERFUL DEITIES OF BOTH DEATH AND HEALING

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

Erreshkigal is the older sister of the goddess Inanna. While her sister is goddess of the somewhat contradictory domains of aggression and love, Ereshkigal is the goddess of both death and birth. Whereas Inanna gets to be Queen of Heaven, Ereshkigal is the Queen of Kur - the Sumerian underworld. Ereshkigal once had a husband called Gugalanna, but he seems to have died.

When Inanna descends to the underworld, she says she is coming to commemorate his death. Some have suggested that Gugalanna was the Bull of Heaven that the hero Gilgamesh fought and slew, and that this explains how the god came to die. When Inanna visits her sister she goes to her palace at the gates of the underworld. This palace is guarded by seven gates, which are all watched by porters and can be bolted to stop people breaking in, or from escaping death.

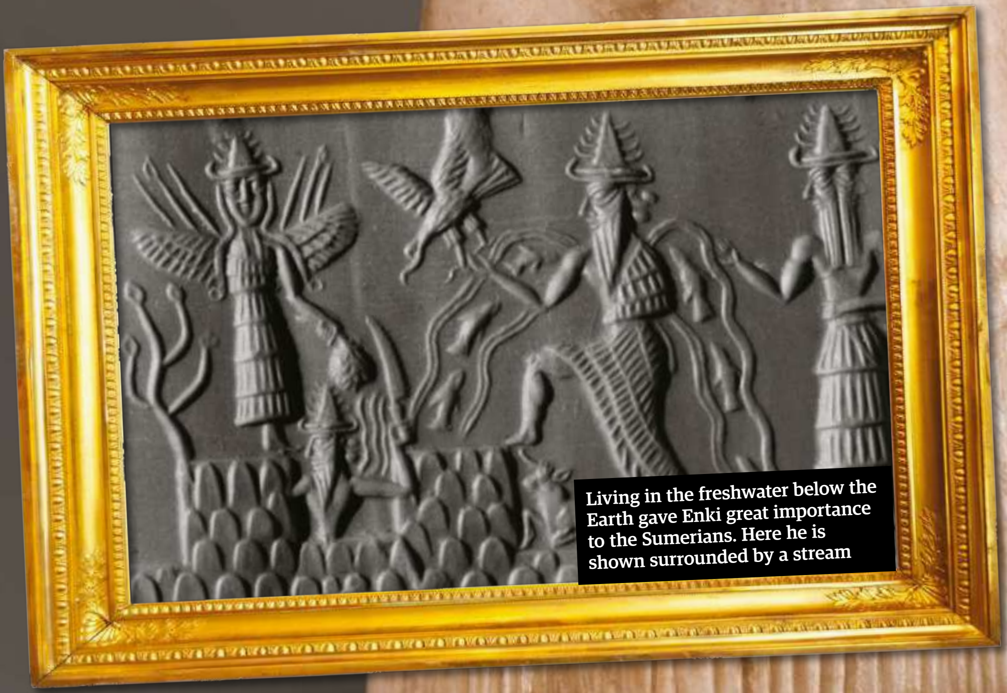
After the death of Gugalanna, Ereshkigal married Nergal. Where Ereshkigal represented death as an entire concept, Nergal was the god of death as inflicted by weapons or pestilence. His romancing of Ereshkigal is just as violent as you would expect from such a deity. One day the gods were holding a feast, but Ereshkigal was unable to attend as being ruler of the underworld kept her busy. She sent her son instead to gather up her share of the food and bring it to her. Every god rose out of respect for Ereshkigal, except for Nergal. When Ereshkigal heard of this offence she demanded he be sent to her for punishment. At each of the seven gates to her throne room, Nergal set a pair of demons to guard his way out. Instead of being humbled he grabs Ereshkigal and threatens to kill her with an axe. To save her life she promises to share her domain with him and to become his wife. Because Nergal kept the passageway open between the world of the living and that of the dead, he was allowed to travel to Earth for six months of the year. This represents the usual period in which wars were fought in the ancient world. As well as being a warrior, Nergal's command of demons gave him a particular importance to the Sumerians, for whom many of the ills of the world were thought to be caused by demonic influence. Thus, Nergal's power was called on to ward away evils of many sorts; he scared away lesser demons.



While some think the Burney Relief, shown here in its original gaudy colours, represented Inanna, others believe it depicts her sister Ereshkigal

© Walters Art Museum

Priests and worshippers, as shown here, flocked to Enki's temples for his ability to drive away demons and bestow blessings



Living in the freshwater below the Earth gave Enki great importance to the Sumerians. Here he is shown surrounded by a stream

© The British Museum Collections, Metropolitan Museum of Art

ENKI: WILY GOD OF WISDOM

A FAVOURITE FIGURE IN SUMERIAN MYTHOLOGY, ENKI ALWAYS HAD AN ANSWER TO ANY PROBLEMS FACED BY GODS OR MEN

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

Enki (later known as Ea) was the Sumerian guardian of the gifts of civilisation known as 'Me'. These included things like kingship, various crafts, and law, but he also had control over wisdom, purification, and the exorcism of demons. Some of these gifts he devolved to other gods, but as the holder of most of them he was among the most important Sumerian deities. As the master of magic Enki featured in many rituals, as the Sumerians believed that ill health and bad luck were caused by demons and Enki was the god who might be able to drive them out.

In his iconography Enki is often shown surrounded by a stream stocked with fish. This is because in one myth he used his magic to put Abzu, the freshwater ocean that was thought to extend beneath the entire world, to sleep when the ocean became fed up with the noise of the new gods. Running the now docile freshwater through irrigation channels allowed the Sumerians to thrive. As the god of wisdom Enki had the ability to create many new things. A later Babylonian myth tells us that Enki created mankind from clay to serve the gods. Enlil found the humans to be tiresome and so sent a flood to wipe them out. It was Enki who warned a human to build an ark, and thus saved humanity from complete destruction. His concern for humanity set him apart from many of the other Sumerian gods, who seem to have treated human life with some disdain.

Enki's wife was Damgalnunna but his lover was the goddess Ninhursag - Lady of the Sacred Mountains. She had powers over fertility and completed some of the creations Enki started. Sometimes these two figures are conflated; sometimes they're separate goddesses.

Their daughter was Ninsar, goddess of plants, who Enki also has a daughter with called Ninkurra, the Lady of the Pasture. When Enki slept with Ninkurra, their daughter Uttu was less than thrilled with the idea of sleeping with him and produced plants that poisoned Enki. Only when he was incapacitated did she produce eight children, who were each powerful healing gods, to rescue him. It would take the intelligence of the god Enki himself to make sense of his family tree.

ENLIL: LORD OF ALL GODS

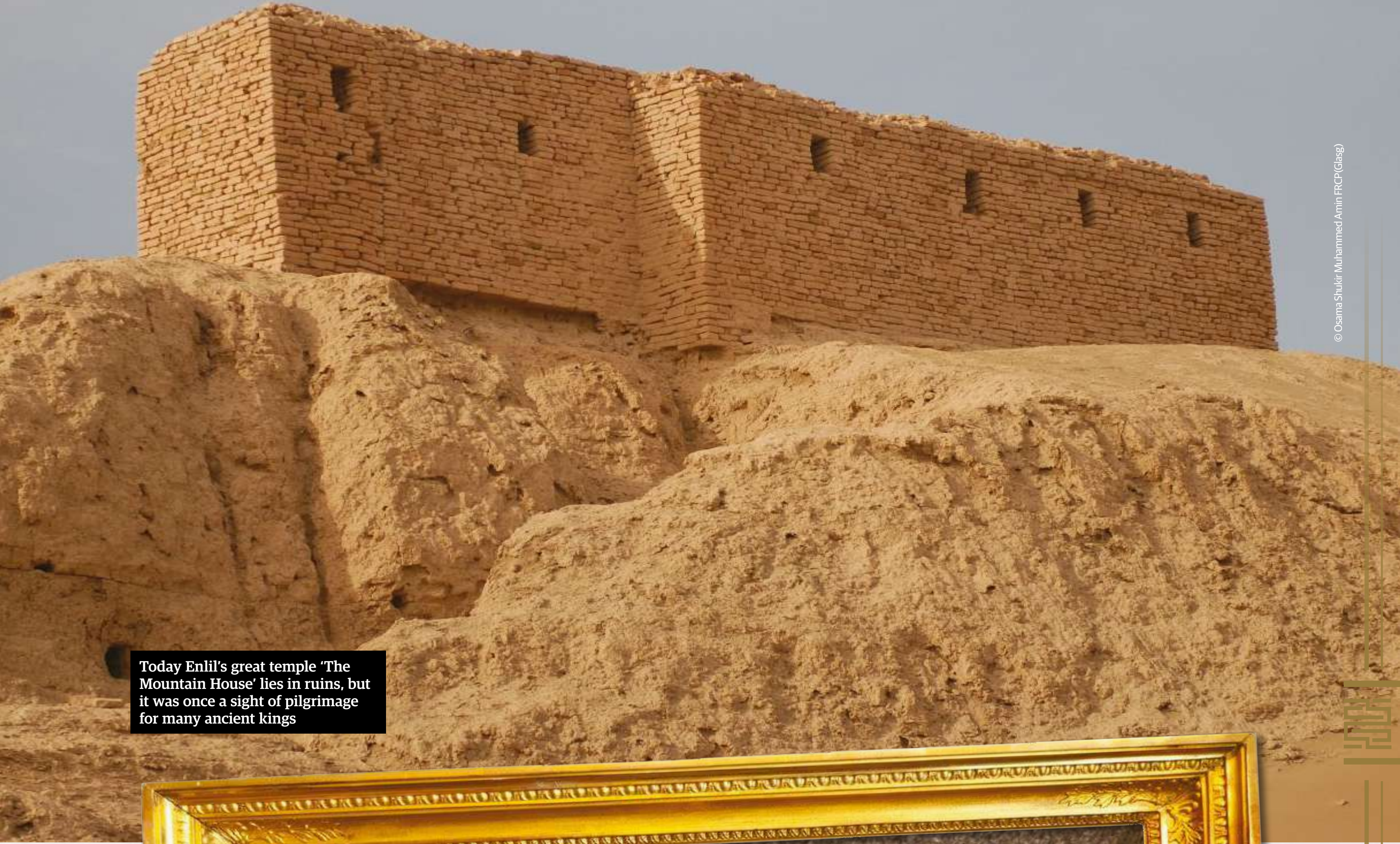
SON OF THE GREAT AN, ENLIL CAME TO SUPPLANT HIS FATHER AS THE MAIN GOD OF THE SUMERIAN PANTHEON

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

For the ancient Sumerians a triad of gods held the greatest power in the universe. An was the father of the gods whose word was law. Enki was the wise god of creation. Enlil was the master god who ruled the assembly of the heavenly host and controlled life on Earth. As Enlil separated his father the sky from his mother Earth he made the world as it is today. His innate powers were over storms, rain, and winds, but his writ went much further due to the honour the other gods held him in. When humans were making too much noise and disturbing his sleep it was Enlil who ordered a deluge to wipe them out. Only when he relented were humans allowed to return to the world.

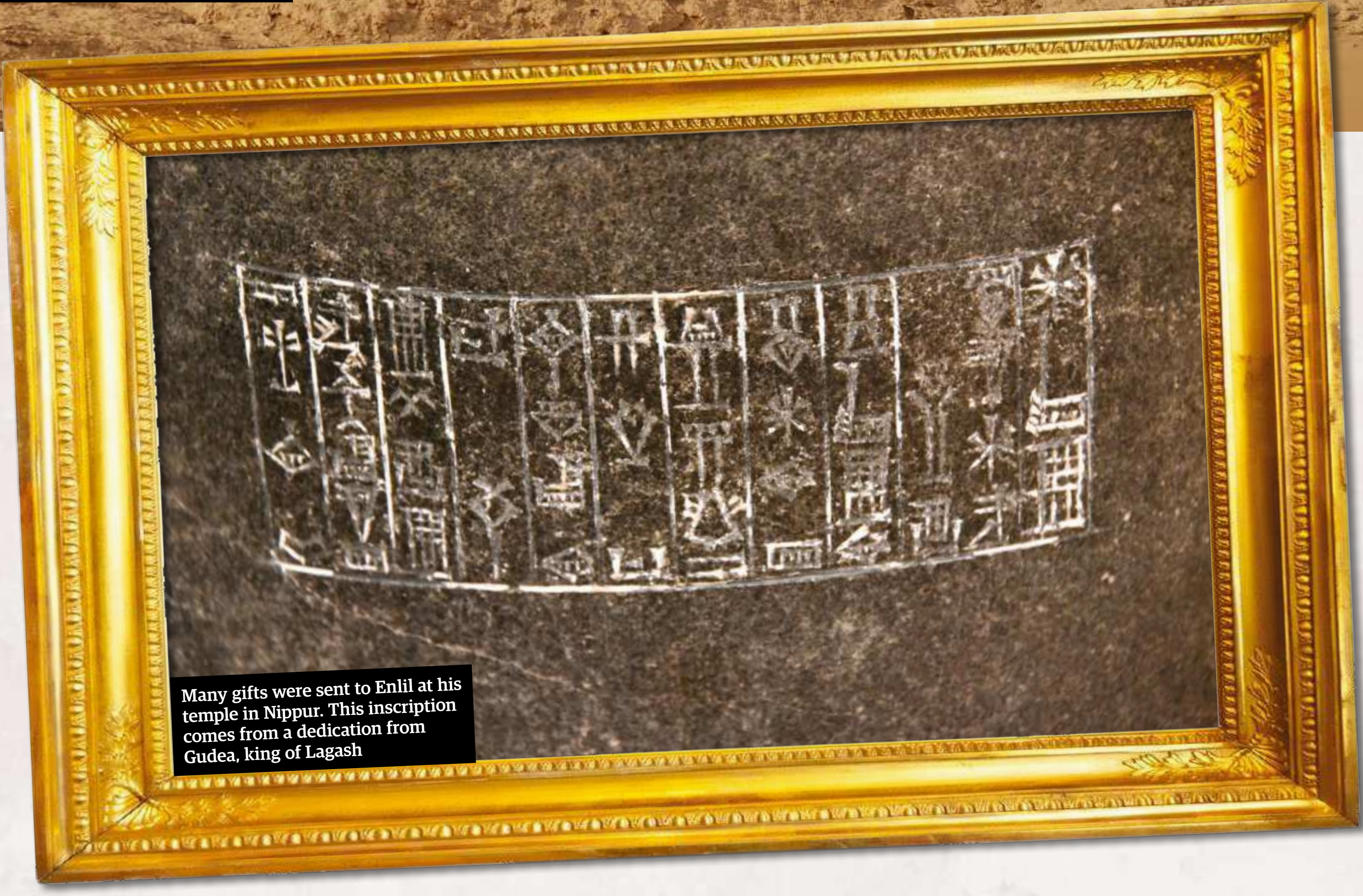
Enlil was known as the 'King of All Lands', 'Father of the Black-Headed People', and especially as 'The Well Respected'. His name came to represent leadership both in heaven and on Earth. The king Ur-Namma boasted that "Enlil… bestowed kingship on me." As the patron deity of the city Nippur, Enlil was granted a temple known as the 'Mountain House' there, which was the centre of his worship. It was apparently magnificent; as one poem says, "The house of Enlil towers high in full grandeur; in its midst is a mountain of aromatic cedars." So important was Enlil as a universal leader that no palace was built in Nippur, as a sign that he was literally king over the city. Other kings would journey to his temple to have their own kingship affirmed by the god.

Enlil features in many Sumerian myths but often does not take part himself, often sending other gods on adventures or advising them on what they should do. One myth, however, describes Enlil's unconventional wooing of his wife Ninlil. When Ninlil walked along the banks of the holy river of Nippur she was seen by Enlil, who took an immediate fancy to her, and the two had sex. The other gods deemed Enlil to have become impure and banished him to the underworld. Yet when Ninlil followed after him, Enlil disguised himself the underworld's gatekeepers and pretended not to know where Enlil had gone. Each time he seduced Ninlil. From their intercourse sprang the great gods Nanna the Moon, Nergal lord of the Underworld, Ninazu the healer, and Enbilulu, the inspector of canals. Nergal, Ninazu and Enbilulu are then ransomed to the underworld to allow Enlil, his wife, and the baby Moon god to return to Earth.



Today Enlil's great temple 'The Mountain House' lies in ruins, but it was once a sight of pilgrimage for many ancient kings

© Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg)



Many gifts were sent to Enlil at his temple in Nippur. This inscription comes from a dedication from Gudea, king of Lagash

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Nanna, often symbolised by the crescent moon, was shown above the image of many kings

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The great ziggurat at Ur was the home of Nanna on Earth and the centre of the city

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NANNA: GOD OF THE MOON

DESCRIBED AS "THE KING, THE HOLY BARGE WHICH TRAVERSES THE SKY", NANNA CONTROLLED THE CYCLES OF HUMAN LIFE

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

Nanna the Moon god was one of the more important deities in the Sumerian pantheon. In lists of the gods he is often placed just after the ruling triad of An, Enki, and Enlil. As the child of Enlil he has a special place among the gods and was set as the patron god over the great city of Ur. The ziggurat that loomed over the city was the site of his temple, known as 'The House of Great Light'. As Ur grew in importance the worship of Nanna spread and so did his role in Sumerian religion. From being a god of the Moon in his earliest incarnations he came to represent wisdom, and was sometimes named as the king of heaven.

Earlier myths however make clear that Nanna was not the leader of the gods, when he goes to offer the first fruits of the harvest to Enlil. Nanna gathered in his boat all the good things that should be offered to the head of the pantheon. He brings fatted sheep, bulls, eggs, reeds, and oils for the house of his father. In an unusually tender moment, his father Enlil rewards Nanna for his efforts, telling his porter to "Give sweet cakes to my little fellow who eats sweet cakes. Give sweet cakes to my Nanna who loves eating sweet cakes."

Nanna was symbolised as a bull because of the similarities between the crescent moon and a bull's horns. A lengthy poem, which describes the cattle belonging to Nanna, also suggests that Nanna may have had a role as a farming god. He was also a favourite deity of kings for his perceived strength. One king was praised for protecting Nanna, and even taking on the powers of Nanna's bulls. "You hurl angry words against the people of the foreign lands that are hostile to Nanna. You are adorned with splendid horns, like a virile wild bull."

His wife Ningal was goddess of reeds and was especially favoured by cow-herders who raised their livestock in the marshes of Mesopotamia. With Ningal, Nanna was the parent to the gods Utu, Inanna, and Ereshkigal.

Given the Moon's associations with fertility cycles, Nanna came to be called on by women wishing to conceive or facing childbirth. One poem takes the form of Nanna addressing one of his cows as she produces a calf. He uses his powers to soothe her pains and the poem ends with a prayer that the lady reading it may have as easy a birth as the cow.

UTU:
GOD OF THE SUN

IN A LAND OF FEROCIOUSLY HOT SUMMERS, THE GOD OF THE SUN COULD BE BOTH A POWERFUL ALLY AND A TERRIBLE ENEMY

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

The Sun disc of Utu, later Shamash, was a popular symbol in Mesopotamian art and especially favoured in images of kings

© Wikimedia

The brilliant light of the Sun represented the power of Utu. Utu could therefore be both a beneficial protector by shining his light forth to make plants grow, but also a terrifying enemy if he brought a drought. From his chariot, which drove the sun across the sky, he also administered justice, morality, and truth, as no one could hide from his gaze.

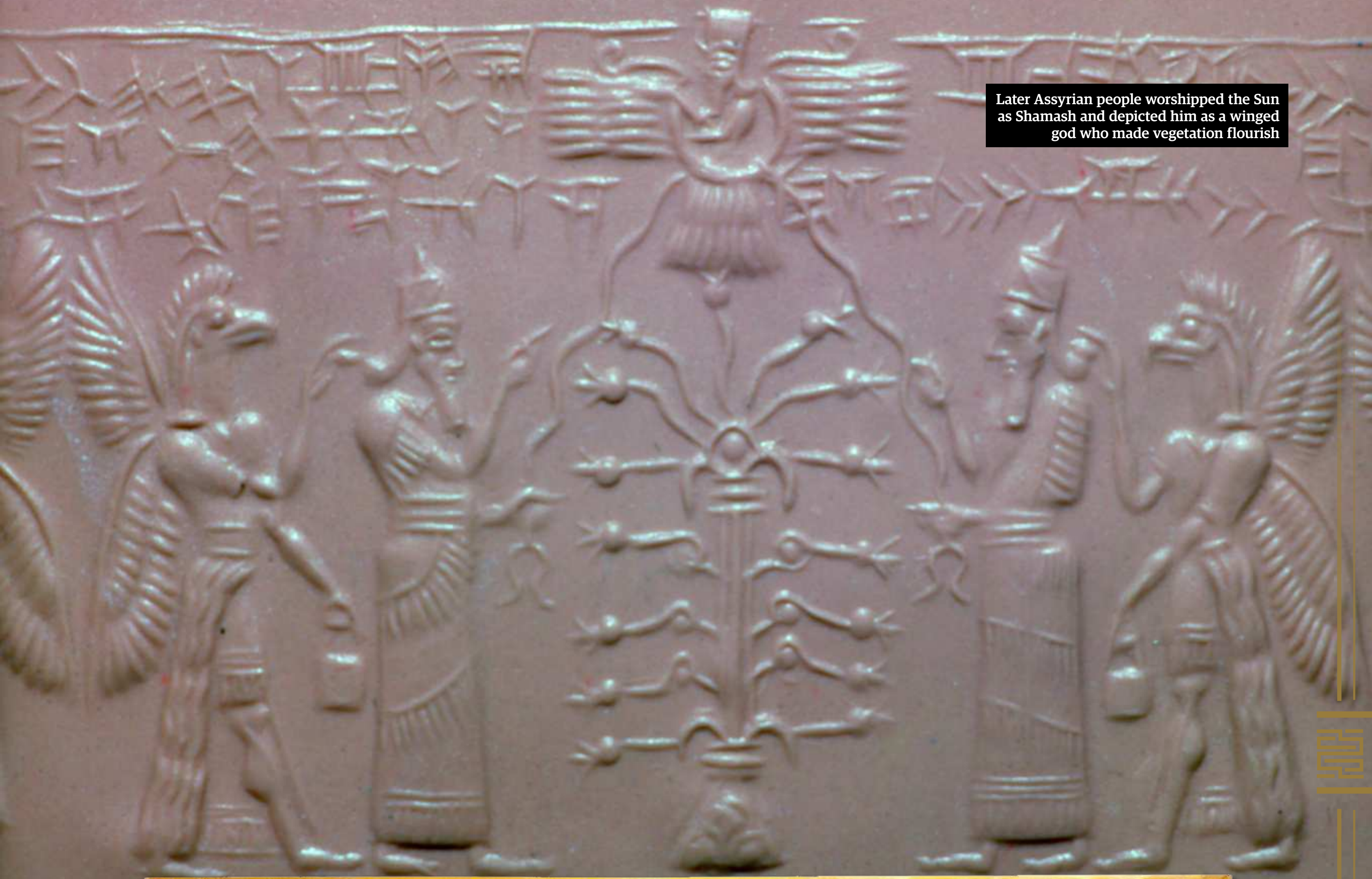
In hymns to Utu he is described as having a beard of blue lapis lazuli and radiant beauty, but also amazing power. "As my king comes forth, the heavens tremble before him and the earth shakes before him."

At the end of each day Utu passed out of the world through a long tunnel in the West and entered the heavenly domes. In the morning he returned through another tunnel in the East. Cylinder seals show his passage through his daily course ending by passing through gates protected by two other gods. One of Gilgamesh's tasks was to try to sprint through one of these tunnels before the Sun-god could return, which would have led to the mostly human hero's fiery demise.

During legal disputes, an item from a temple could be brought out for all parties to swear on. For Utu this item was a curved and large-toothed saw used for pruning, an item which the god is often shown holding in images. As a god with responsibility for vegetable growth he no doubt had much pruning to do.

In iconography his Sun symbol is often held up by scorpion-men who acted as his attendants. Utu could be a powerful ally to have. In one legend he helped the god Dumuzi to escape from demons sent to drag him to the underworld while in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* he aided the eponymous hero in his fight against the monstrous Huwawa. Babylonian texts cast the Sun god as a protector of travellers and traders, as he sees everything from his lofty position.

Utu's wife was Serida, the goddess of light. As the partner of the Sun she shared his role in bringing life to the Earth and she also shared Utu's interest in humanity. She was sometimes called on to intervene with her husband, as when Gilgamesh's mother asks Serida to get Utu to watch over her son even when the sun has set. Since Gilgamesh comes through his trials (mostly) unharmed, it was clearly a useful thing to have Utu and Serida on your side.



Later Assyrian people worshipped the Sun as Shamash and depicted him as a winged god who made vegetation flourish

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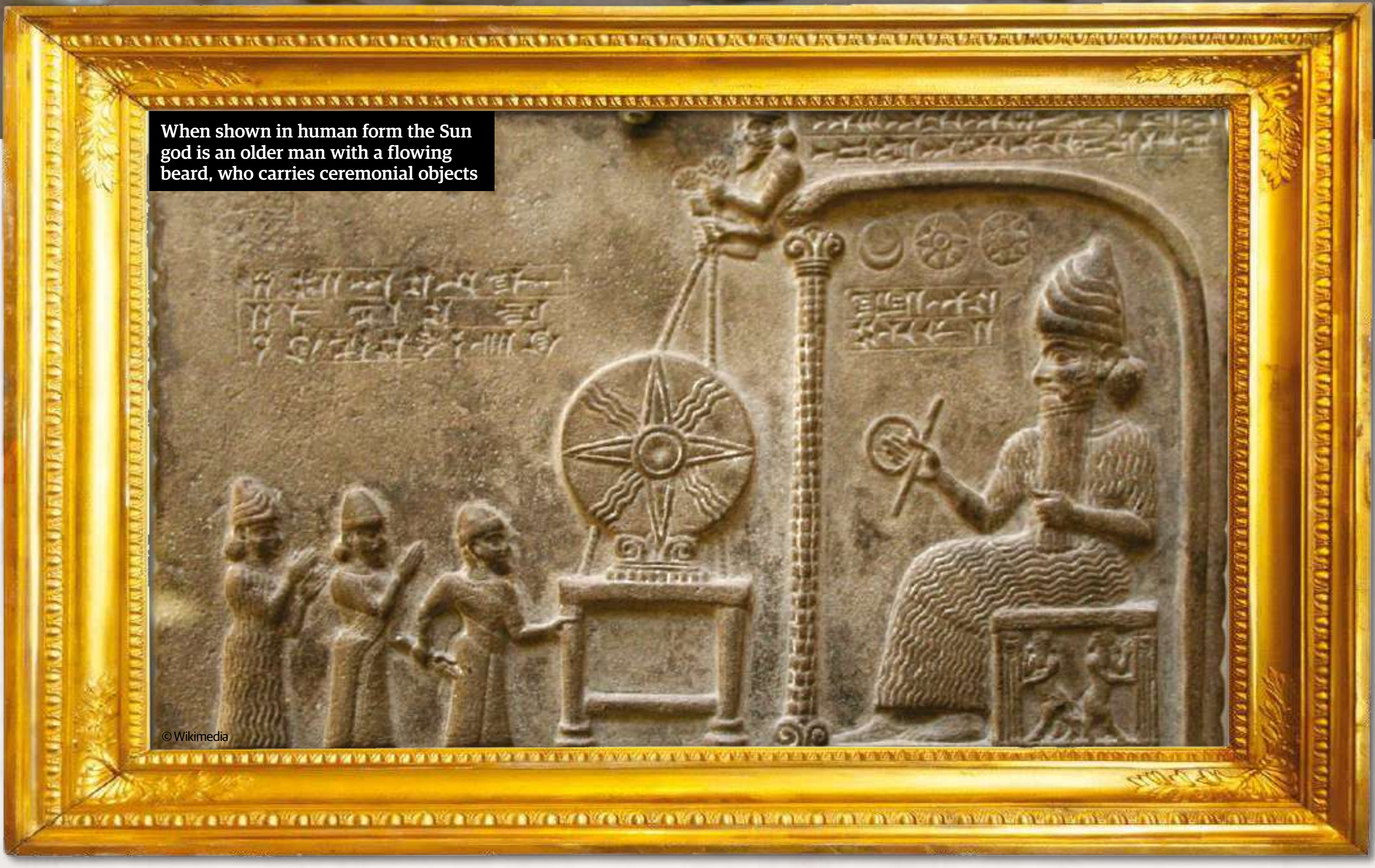

When shown in human form the Sun god is an older man with a flowing beard, who carries ceremonial objects

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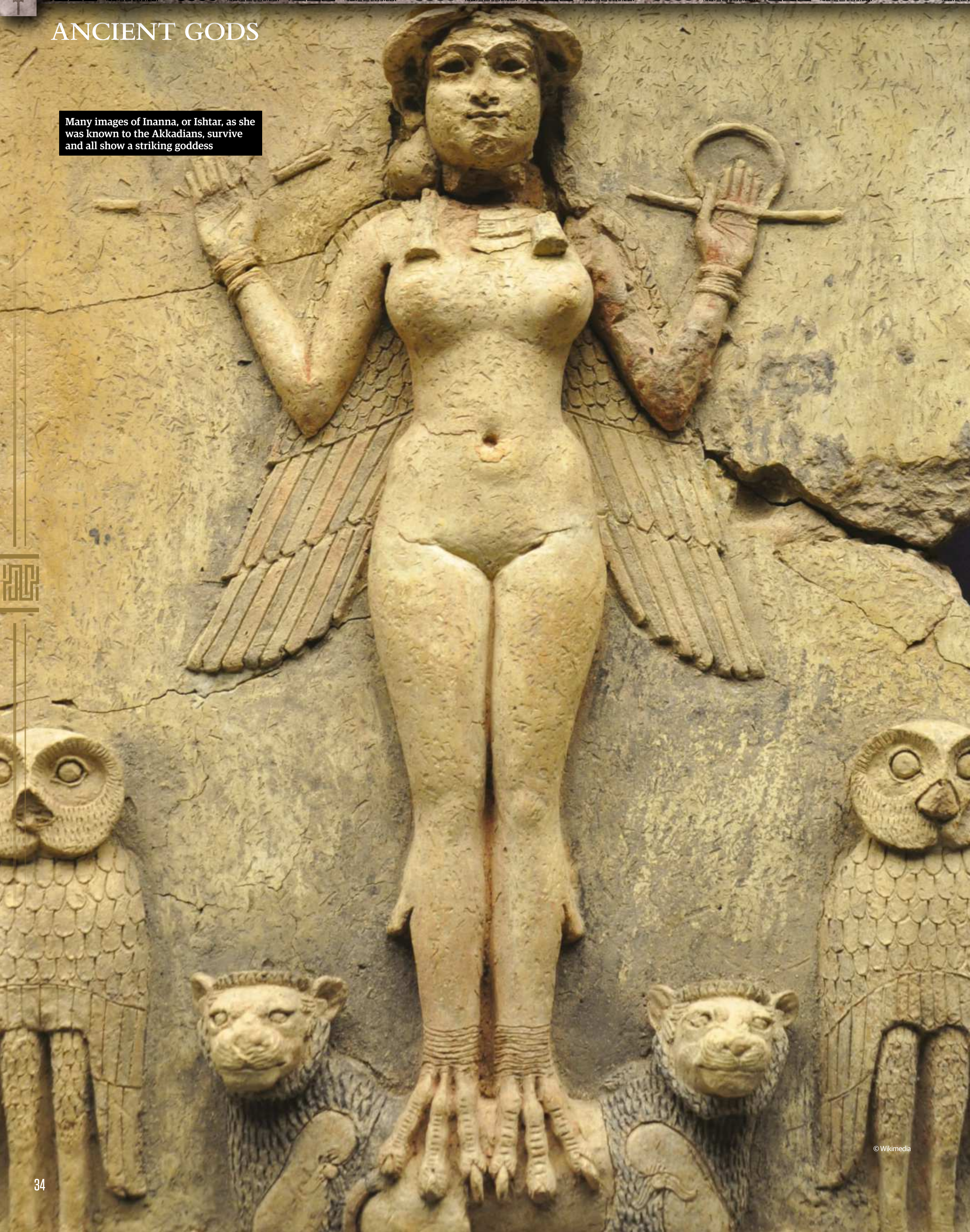

Many images of Inanna, or Ishtar, as she was known to the Akkadians, survive and all show a striking goddess

© Wikimedia

INANNA: TERRIBLE GODDESS OF LOVE

INANNA WAS ONE OF THE MOST REVERED, AND FEARED, GODS IN THE SUMERIAN PANTHEON, AS BEAUTIFUL AS CHERISHED LOVE AND WRATHFUL AS A LOVE BETRAYED

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

Inanna, known as the 'Lady of Heaven,' was the Sumerian patron deity of love, sex, fertility, and beauty. She also had another aspect as the deity in charge of war, aggression, and justice. The planet Venus, which appears sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening, became associated with her changeable nature. Both aspects of her divinity were amply explored in the myths associated with her.

In the earliest myths Inanna is a vegetative goddess associated with the growth of crops and fertility of the fields. Her symbol, a reed tied into a loop at the top, appears in the very earliest Sumerian texts and she was listed amongst the chief gods. Later legends attached to her to produce the fearsomely potent goddess who would play a starring role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As the special protector of the city of Uruk, ruled by Gilgamesh, it was only to be expected that she would attempt to humble that haughty monarch.

In the epic poem, Inanna attempts to seduce Gilgamesh but he refuses her advances, pointing out how Inanna's lovers tend to suffer a terrible fate. She twisted a shepherd to make him a wolf, and the noble wild stallion became a beast to be bridled and ridden when she was done with it. In return for his insults Inanna threatens to raise the dead as an army of ravening zombies to be revenged on Gilgamesh.

When later kings invoked Inanna as their protector it was often in this wrathful form, as when Sargon of Akkad called for her aid in battle. Many others still turned to her as the goddess of love. Inscriptions have been found asking for help in cases of unrequited love. Her arranged marriage to the god Dumuzi was thought of as a sacred marriage that also bound the human world to the divine. Each new year the king would re-enact their union to bring Inanna's protection down on the city once more.

Dumuzi was the Sumerian god of shepherds and his mythological marriage was a thorny one. In the tale *Inanna's Journey to the Underworld* the goddess becomes trapped in the shadowy realm of death and only escapes when she convinces the demons guarding her to drag her husband down to the underworld in her place. Yet in *The Return of Dumuzi* Inanna is mourning her husband and eventually manages to release him for half of each year, a story mirroring seasonal growth and decay. No one ever said love was not complex.

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Inanna's marriage to Dumuzi was sometimes contentious, as shown here, where he is dragged to hell and tortured by demons

RELIGIONS BEFORE THE BOOK

THE POLYTHEISTIC PRACTISES OF THE ANCIENT NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST PREDATE THE FAMOUS FAITHS THAT FOLLOWED THEM

WRITTEN BY: APRIL MADDEN

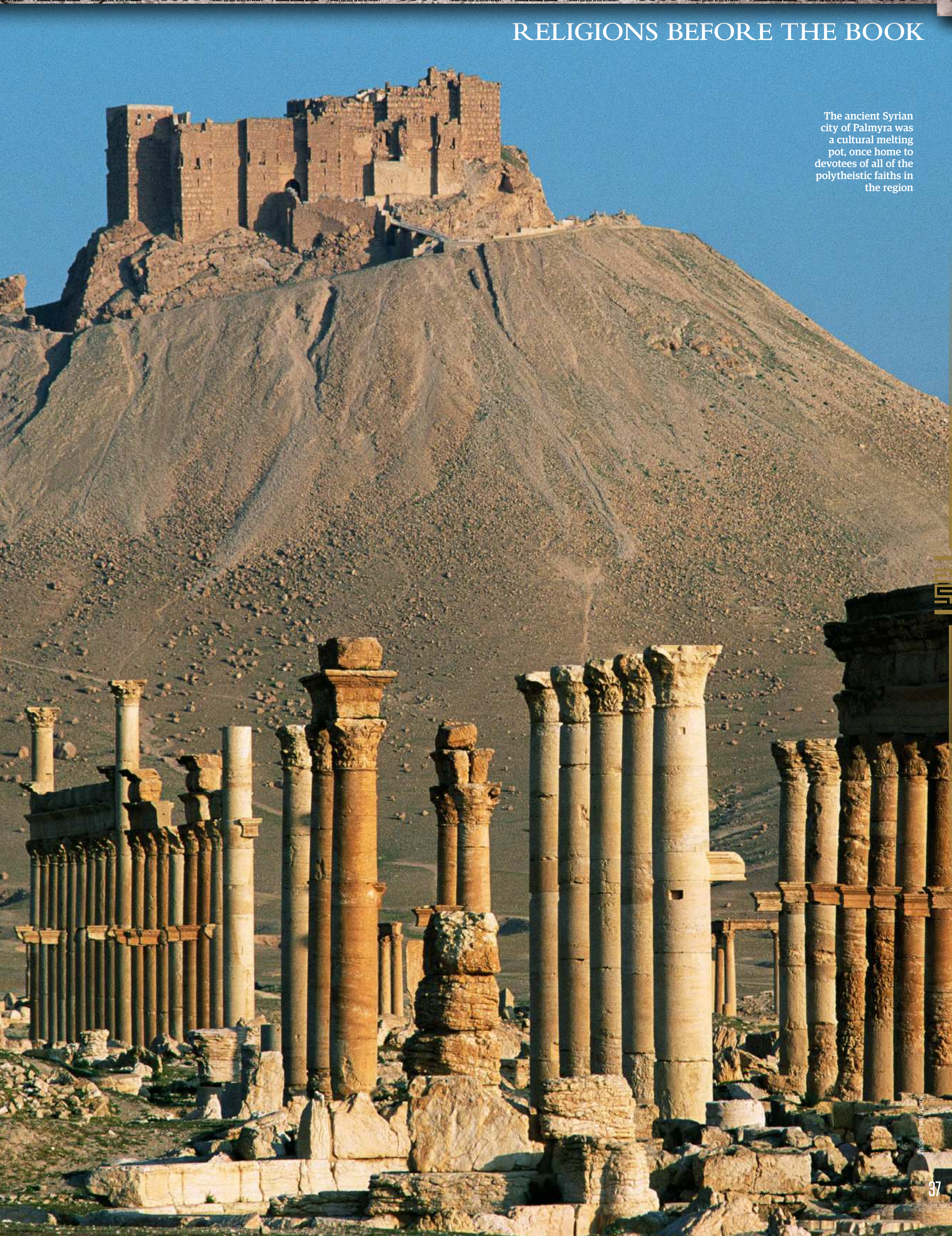
Think of the Near and Middle East, and sooner or later the icons and iconographies of the Religions of the Book - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - will come to mind. The three faiths are powerfully and intimately connected to the lands that birthed them, especially to the thrice-holy city of Jerusalem. But they are not the only religions that rose from the deserts and fertile oases, the mountainous uplands and mighty rivers of what is traditionally known as the cradle of civilisation.

Egypt, ancient Sumer and the Akkadian and Babylonian civilisations that followed it all clustered around the ancient Near and Middle East and had an influence on its social, moral and religious thought. Anthropologically, the Hilly Flanks and Fertile Crescent of the region have long been thought of as the home of some of the earliest archaeological signs of civilisation, such as agriculture and city building. The regions of the Near and Middle East have the cachet of being some of the earliest recorded civilisations, and their myths have traditionally been among the most influential worldwide, thanks to the ideological dominance of the Religions of the Book over the last 2000 years. Some theorists have even suggested that these newer faiths grew from seeds planted by the religions that came before, although naturally some Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians are wary of even considering this idea.

The ancient Levant - the area that later forms the setting for much of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), the Bible and the Quran - was once a polytheistic place. At the head of the old pantheon was El. Like the English word 'god', in ancient Hebrew and related Semitic languages, 'el' can be a generic term that can mean any god, or 'El' can mean the supreme god himself. In this case it refers to a ruling god with a panoply of roles and titles. His epithets include 'father of gods', 'father of men', 'lord of heaven', and 'creator of Earth'. But El didn't get all of the limelight to himself. Another common epithet for him is 'husband of Asherah'.

Asherah, or Athirat, the great queen and mother goddess of the ancient Levant, was a powerful influence on later religions as well as on the contemporary faith of her own followers. Often referred to by her followers as 'She who treads on the sea' (abat 'Atirat yammi), she was also known as 'Elat' ('Goddess'), 'Qodesh' or 'Qudshu' ('holiness') and as 'qaniyatu 'ilhm' - the creatrix of the gods. She must have been a busy lady, because the region was packed with lesser gods and goddesses. Gods of the Sun, gods of the Moon; gods of water and wind and earth and fire; gods of summer and winter, storms and dew, plague and healing; gods of love and war, of food and fertility. There was even a god of dancing - his name was Marquod.

One reason the ancient Near and Middle East had so many gods is to do with the region's complex geography. We think of this area as being dominated by desert, but in the climate of previous centuries, all four types of biome were represented in varying proportions. This made the terrain complicated and even dangerous to navigate. To a farmer from the Fertile Crescent, the desert was



The ancient Syrian city of Palmyra was a cultural melting pot, once home to devotees of all of the polytheistic faiths in the region

Imagine Credit: Alamy

death. Far better to stay in your own lands and keep to your own customs - not out of a fear of the foreign but from sheer practicality. Many gods ruled over just a few acres of date orchards or the precincts of a single city. They were folksy, local deities that were called upon to protect fields, shore up walls, and find lost sheep, propitiated with the same food that the families who worshipped them were having for dinner.

And yet, the Levant was so rich in valuable things - metals and gemstones, spices and incenses, the hard and fragrant wood of Lebanese cedars, the vibrant purple dye extracted from murex shells - that travel couldn't be helped. With a precious cargo to transport and vast swathes of challenging terrain that had to be gone around rather than straight through, the merchants of the region banded together into caravans - convoys of traders headed in the same direction, travelling together for safety. Naturally, they chatted and shared ideas and beliefs. A metalworker, asked about his beautiful gold and lapis jewellery, may have explained how he invoked Kothar-wa-Khasis, god of craftsmanship, to sanctify his endeavours; a grocer taking too long to load his wares may have jokingly referred his compatriots to Nikkal, goddess of orchards, who blessed him with a bumper crop. Gods and their legends spread from place to place via a network of tradesmen. And when the caravan reached its destination in one of the great cities, there were other travellers, looking to buy the caravan's wares, and they too had brought their gods with them - Greek, Hittite, Minoan, Etruscan, and more. There may have been temples to the great gods of the region and shrines to the city's own, personal, slightly lesser ones. The trade routes of the ancient Near East were a melting pot of myth and legend, of syncretism, storytelling and evangelising. Merchants who returned home with pockets jingling brought more than money back with them. They brought new tales, and new deities to venerate. A family fed on coin earned at the marketplace in Tyre may well have given thanks to its tutelary god, Melqart, despite living leagues away from the city. The family of a Phoenician master sailor are likely to have encountered stories and images of gods from as far afield as Egypt, ancient Greece, North Africa and possibly even Britain. The Levantine people known as the Phoenicians, named for the colour of the highly prized purple dye that they traded, not only navigated the rivers, lakes and shallow inland seas of their home region in their hi-tech ships, but were also known to travel around and even out of the Mediterranean, past the Pillars of Hercules (modern-day Gibraltar) and into the ocean we now call the Atlantic, although they never revealed to anyone else what it was that they found there. It was most likely their source of tin, the metal that was mixed with copper to make the alloy that ushered in the Bronze Age.

Like a lot of ancient gods, many of those worshipped by the polytheistic Phoenicians provided explanations for natural phenomena. Shachar and Shalim, the twin gods of dawn and dusk, who delineated day and night, obviously lived in the mountains that thrust into the boundary between Earth and sky. Light lingered longer on the mountaintops; the twin gods clearly blessed their home with their presence. Fish-tailed Dagon was a god of crops, fishery and fertility, his watery nature perhaps linked to the irrigation techniques that enriched the region's farmland

Image Credit: Mappo

The lion was a popular symbol for many Near and Middle Eastern goddesses, including Qetesh (an Egyptian aspect of Asherah) and Al-Lat

ONE VERSUS MANY

How far back does the tension between polytheism and monotheism go? Did one of them evolve from the other? And can either of them really claim to be more authentic to the spirit of ancient religion?

◆

For many years, Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition all agreed that the adoption of monotheism by the previously polytheistic peoples of the ancient Near and Middle East was a return to what they conceptualised as variants of the world's 'original' and 'correct' monotheistic religion, an idea that folklorist Andrew Lang referred to as the 'Urreligion', and a similar concept to the one that the occultists of the Western Esoteric tradition referred to as "the ancient wisdom religion" and "the secret doctrine". Proto-Indo-European myth can provably connect gods and their stories across continents.

Anthropologists used to favour the idea that religion had 'progressed' from animism to polytheism to monotheism. We now know that that's not the case, and that the Religions of the Book were far from the only monotheistic faiths that were followed centuries ago. Zoroastrianism is one important example. Another is Atenism, the worship of a single deity of the Egyptian pantheon that was introduced by Pharaoh Amenhotep IV. Greek philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon believed that most Greek gods were mere constructs that symbolised the different roles that a single divinity embodied.

Amenhotep IV tried to turn Egypt into a monotheistic society

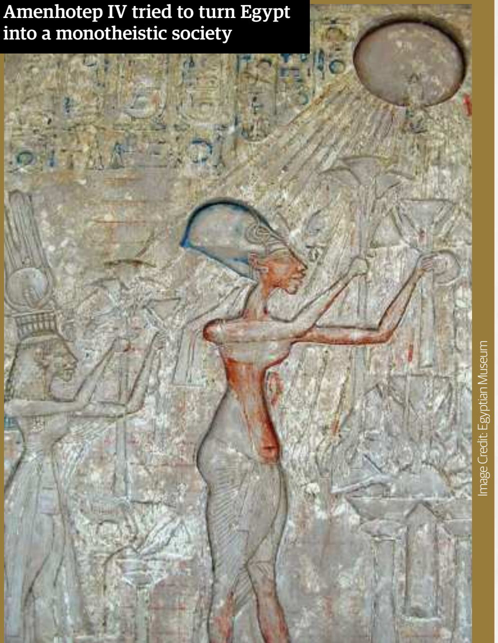


Image Credit: Egyptian Museum

"GODS AND THEIR LEGENDS SPREAD FROM PLACE TO PLACE VIA A NETWORK OF TRADESMEN"

Melqart, the patron god of the Phoenician city of Tyre. In this role, as the deity of a famous and wealthy city, he may have been the Ba'al referred to in the Bible

Image Credit: Akrasia25

The major Arabian goddesses Al-Lāt, Al-'Uzzá and Manāt. Worship of these previously popular deities died out with the rise of Islam in the region

and provided fresh fish even inland. Like many male gods, including El, he was addressed with the honorific 'Ba'al', meaning 'lord', 'master', or 'husband' (in the sense of one who looks after and manages land, crops and livestock); other instances of the prefix pop up in the names of the gods Ba'al-Zephon, Ba'al-Hammon and Ba'al-Hadad, as well as countless others. But many gods were simply addressed as Ba'al; they were the Lord, and their worshippers left it at that. Later theology would syncretise all of these disparate Ba'als into one almighty whole, a powerful and just god who fights the enemies of the land and even defeats death. In some areas he became tangled with, and even supplanted El, although in other places the original ruling god became stronger and more powerful than ever before, and cast Ba'al down. In these places, as El himself noted, "I revealed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as Ēl Shaddāi, but was not known to them by my name, Yahweh".

If some of these names seem familiar, that's because they are. Another name for the Levant is Canaan, the 'Promised Land' "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates", that God promised to Abraham in the Book of Genesis. Canaan was the stage for a bloody conflict between the polytheism of the deep past and the new monotheism that was emerging; here, initially in the shape of Judaism. Many of the historical stories of both the Tanakh and the Old Testament of the Bible depict wars over territory and faith between the pagan Phoenicians and the ideologues of the new religion.

In the Old Testament, fishy Dagon is a god of the Philistines; his temple at Beth-dagon is destroyed by the super-strength of the Jewish hero Samson. Phoenician princess-priestess Jezebel, married to Israel's King Ahab, attempts to reintroduce the worship of Ba'al; she is thrown from her palace window on the orders of the warrior Jehu, who assumes the throne and makes the city of Jezreel entirely Judaic once more. Asherah, whose sacred poles or trees once used to be displayed in the same temples that Yahweh was worshipped in, but which were cut down and proscribed by Josiah, king of Judah, in the 7th century BCE, is entirely absent from English translations of the Old Testament thanks to centuries of linguistic misunderstanding. In ancient Greek versions of the Bible, 'Asherah' is translated as 'alsos', meaning 'grove'. In the Latin Vulgate Bible this becomes 'nemus', or 'wood'. By the time of the King James Bible, the first English translation of the text, 'nemus' has become 'grove' in truth. Ba'al gets off even worse. In those places where he has not supplanted El he becomes instead his great enemy. Taking his epithet 'Ba'al Zebub' (Lord of the Flies), he is transformed into Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons. 'Baal' is cited as the name of a demon as late as the 17th century, in the occult grimoire *The Lesser Key of Solomon*. As for El, that quote about his real name being Yahweh comes from the Book of Exodus. So is El the Almighty God of the Bible? The uncertainty is likely down to the word 'el', like 'god', being used in multiple ways, but some scholars have boldly suggested that a line can be drawn straight from Sumerian Enlil through Phoenician El to Judeo-Christian Yahweh/Jehovah.

The Religions of the Book, however, weren't the only ones that embraced monotheism, worshipping one god rather than many. East of the Levant, the peoples of what would one day become the Persian Empire were turning to the teachings of the mysterious holy man Zoroaster, possibly as early as the 2nd millennium BCE. Zoroaster urged his countryfolk to do away with animal sacrifices to the gods and to dispense with overly fussy religious rituals. He encouraged the worship of the lord of wisdom, Ahura Mazda. Confusingly (or not, for anyone familiar with certain other religions from the region), while Zoroastrianism is monotheistic (and one of the world's oldest and longest surviving religions, still practised to this day), Ahura Mazda was sometimes conceptualised as a holy trinity. The other two aspects of the trinity were Mithra – the Zoroastrian Divinity associated with oaths and oathkeeping, light, truth, and harvests, and later thought by the Romans to be the same Mithras worshipped at the Mithraic Mysteries throughout the Roman Empire – and Anahita, once an Iranian goddess of water, healing, and wisdom, and associated with the Vedic goddess of knowledge, music and art, Sarasvati, who is still worshipped by Hindus today. Zoroastrianism's cosmology features a source of evil too, Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, a destructive and chaotic being against whom Ahura Mazda and his followers must strive.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Persian Empire, and several times it held what was then the world's largest empire firmly in its theocratic grip. Persia itself was an open, live-and-let-live kind of place, and for much of its history it didn't impose its state religion on its people, particularly those who had been brought into the empire via conquest. But it did impose a blanket tax that every citizen had to pay to their nearest Zoroastrian temple. It was ten per cent of their income, a figure that should be familiar to anyone who's ever paid a religious tithe – it's where the word derives from. This innovation, picked up when Persia conquered Babylon, was later adopted by the civilisation that conquered Persia: the Muslim Arabs who invaded in the 7th century CE.

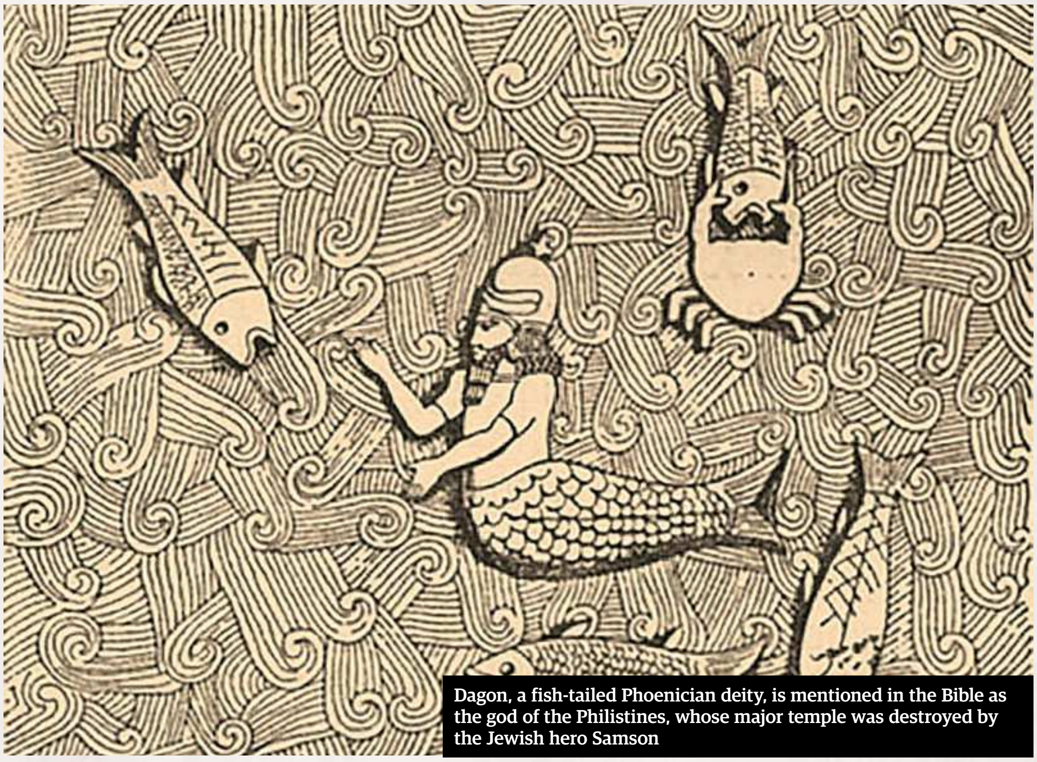
Originating from the southern Arabian Peninsula, by the time they conquered the Persian Empire the Arabs were decidedly monotheist – Islam had been their dominant religion since the 7th century CE. Yet before that, they too had followed a swathe of different, older gods.

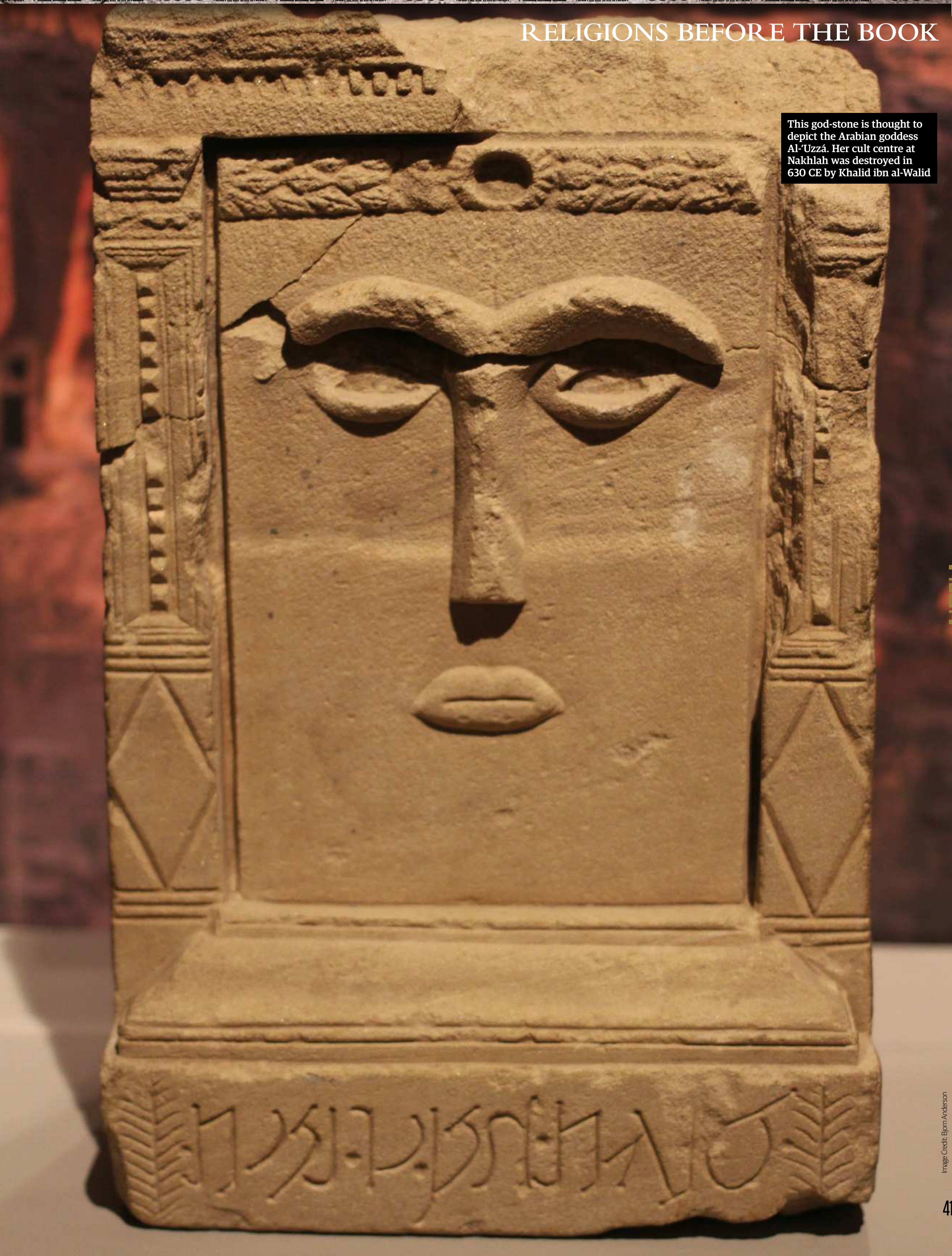
Allah is attested in Arabic poetry at least a generation before Muhammad (again, scholars have considered a possible link to El), but there were also the goddesses Al-Lāt, Al-'Uzzá and Manāt. The names were used to describe a multitude of female figures – it's theorised that Al-Lāt is linked to Asherah, for example. Al-'Uzzá was an oracular deity, and is mentioned in the Quran as one of the pre-Islamic idols destroyed during the region's conversion to Islam. Manāt is the oldest of the three and was possibly a goddess of fortune and fate; again, there are records of her worship being wiped out by the rise of the newer faith. A host of other, minor deities were also venerated, including native gods like Sun goddess Shams and law god Haukim, as well as others imported from further afield. And while pre-Islamic artisans did carve images of their gods and goddesses, many cult images were blocks of simple, undressed stone. Some were carved with astronomical symbols, others with facial features, while some were left entirely blank. Freestanding god-stones, or 'duwar', typically located in a natural, open-air sanctuary, were walked around repeatedly in veneration. In cities, temples formed more ornate places of worship. Both natural and man-made sites of worship could be places of pilgrimage. With many worshippers originating from the highly mobile nomadic Bedouin tribes, the idea of travelling to pray at particular sites naturally became an important part of religious observance.

Mecca was the most important holy place in Arabia even before the foundation of Islam, and many pre-Islamic polytheists visited it to venerate its various deities and idols. Arabic cosmology also featured a rich spirit world populated by demons and djinn. It's theorised that the latter – the origin of the concept of the genie – were once localised nature spirits, whose worship was marginalised by 'bigger', more important gods. Pre-Islamic Arabia had plenty of little, local gods whose purview barely stretched from one horizon to another, in addition to the major deities known to the population at large. But with the rise of the Religions of the Book, the old polytheism began to wane. Followers of different faiths declared ideological war, first on the old gods, and then on each other's newer ones. The holy texts of the Religions of the Book are rife with tales of their adherents taking on the polytheism of the past – and winning. Today, the ancient religions of this region are barely a memory in the sands. The archaeological record of them is still in grave danger: the 2015 destruction of the UNESCO-listed ancient Syrian city of Palmyra, once a cultural melting pot that showcased how the major polytheistic faiths of the region used to live and worship peacefully together, demonstrates quite how easy it is for the rich myths of the deities of the past to be forcibly forgotten.

SHAMASH THE PATRIARCHY

Goddesses in Near and Middle Eastern polytheism have a lot of symbols and titles in common. Lions, snakes, flowers and stars are common motifs; frequently used epithets, aside from 'mistress', 'lady' and 'queen', often include references to the heavens and the sea. Triple goddess iconography is common, although rather than the maiden, mother and crone traditional in the West, Near and Middle Eastern trinities instead tend to invoke a belligerent goddess of war or an inexorable goddess of death as the third member of their triad. Between them they embody youth and energy, sexuality and motherhood, and fate and death. Rulership is a common motif in their iconography; they are usually presented as sovereign queens in their own right, rather than consorts. Their roles are not always 'traditional' feminine ones either: battle goddesses are common, as is the honorific "Mistress of magic". And some gods that have historically been conceptualised as male may not have been. There are etymological and mythological similarities between the Phoenician Sun goddess Shapash, daughter of El and Asherah, and the Akkadian Sun deity Shamash, whose gender is a matter for academic dispute – traditionally he is a god related to Sumerian Utu, but some more recent research may suggest that in fact she might actually be a goddess more closely related to Phoenician Shapash after all.


Dagon, a fish-tailed Phoenician deity, is mentioned in the Bible as the god of the Philistines, whose major temple was destroyed by the Jewish hero Samson



This god-stone is thought to depict the Arabian goddess Al-'Uzzá. Her cult centre at Nakhlah was destroyed in 630 CE by Khalid ibn al-Walid

Image Credit: Bjorn Anderson

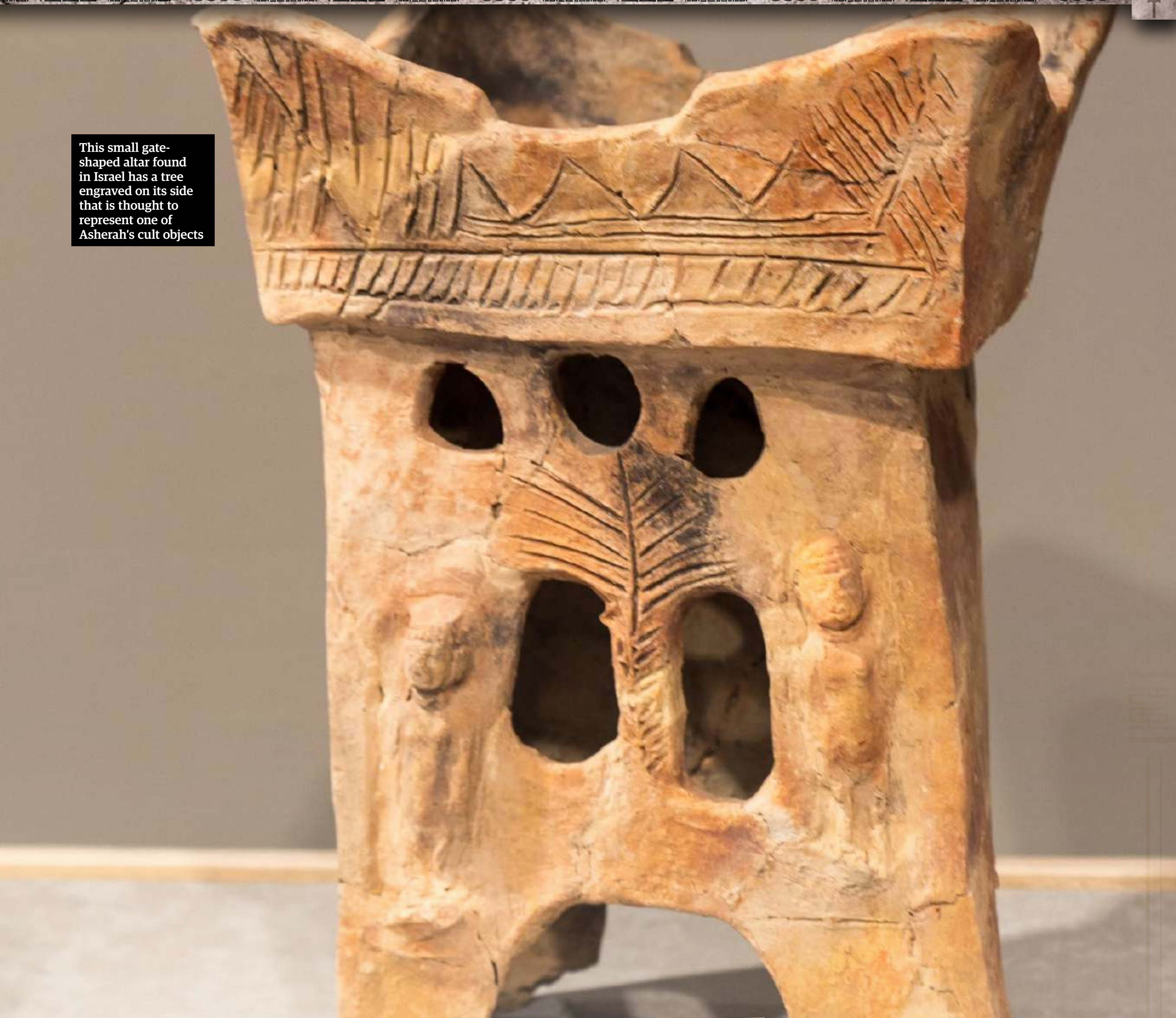
ASHERAH: SHE WHO TREADS ON THE SEA

MONOTHEISTS TRIED AND EVENTUALLY SUCCEEDED IN SUPPRESSING HER WORSHIP, BUT THE CANAANITES HAD ADORED THEIR GREAT MOTHER GODDESS FOR CENTURIES

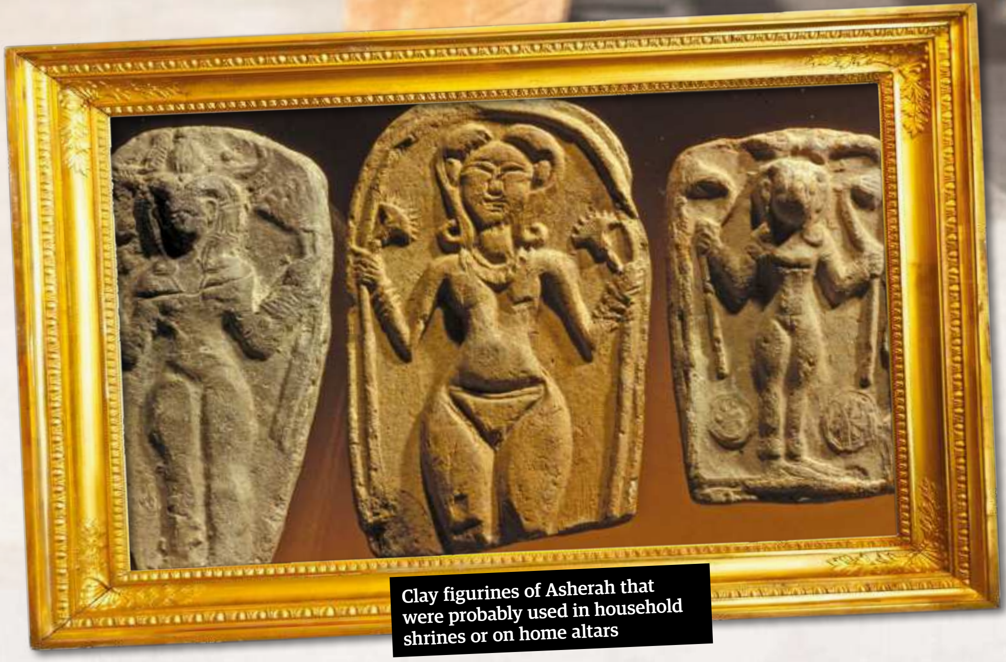
WRITTEN BY: APRIL MADDEN

Her most common epithet is "She who treads on the sea", conjuring images of a graceful, powerful figure with the elements entirely at her command. Her other titles include "Lady Day", "Queen of Heaven" and simply "Goddess". For several centuries she was venerated in homes and temples from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Oman. Whether known locally as Asherah, Ashtoreth or Athirat, she was worshipped as the great mother goddess and as the adored consort of the supreme god El (or occasionally, Ba'al).

Many later sculptures and images represent her as a beautiful woman, but Asherah's most commonly used sacred symbols, heavily used at the time her worship was at its height, have not survived the rigours of time, thanks to both the material they were made of and their deliberate destruction. Most people venerated Asherah using an object of the same name, a wooden pole set up in or near their home or beside a temple. Occasionally a living tree might fulfil the same role; the most commonly used ones were willow, myrtle, walnut and pomegranate, which were all sacred to the goddess, as were grapevines. These Asherah poles are mentioned in the Tanakh and the Bible - the Book of Deuteronomy states "Do not set up any Asherah beside the altar you build to the Lord your God" and "You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make". Several Biblical kings embarked on programmes of destroying Asherah's icons throughout their kingdoms, but before that they had been a feature of the Near and Middle East's landscape for centuries, and the monotheists of Canaan found it difficult to suppress the goddess' worship among their people entirely. The Biblical Book of Jeremiah records disapprovingly that at festival time "The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the Queen of Heaven…" But despite the prophet's railing against the practise, his audience - Jews in exile in Babylon - persisted with their tradition. Jeremiah quotes their pragmatic reply to him: "We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine."



This small gate-shaped altar found in Israel has a tree engraved on its side that is thought to represent one of Asherah's cult objects



Clay figurines of Asherah that were probably used in household shrines or on home altars

EL: CANAAN'S SUPREME GOD

THE LEADER OF THE PHOENICIAN PANTHEON IS A STERN LORD AND A WISE JUDGE, BUT SOME LEVANTINE MYTHS ALSO BRING LEVITY TO HIS LEGENDS

WRITTEN BY: APRIL MADDEN

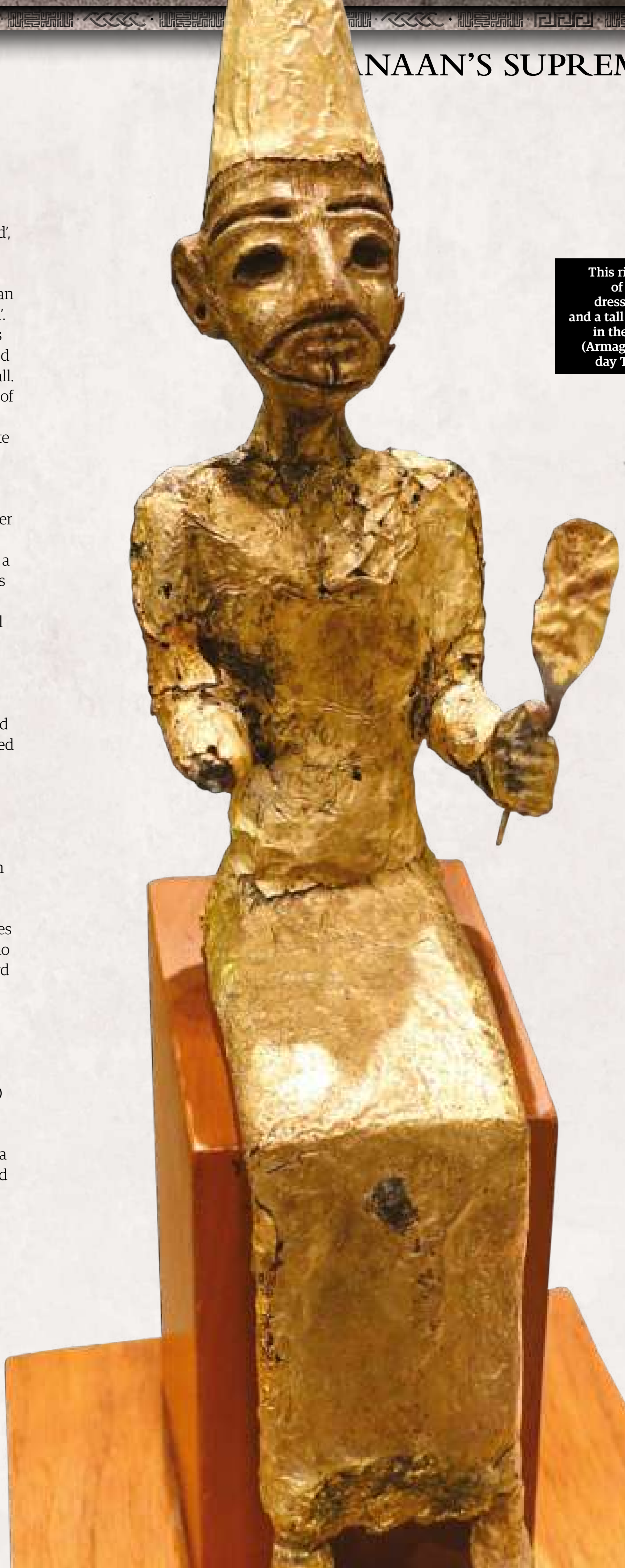
El was frequently conceptualised as Tôru 'Ēl, the bull god, identified with the constellation Taurus and possibly with the Sumerian Bull of Heaven

ANAAN’S SUPREME GOD

With a name that literally means ‘god’, El can be a confusing deity. It’s easy for him to be conflated with lesser deities that bear the title as an honorific, or are described as an ‘el’. Like his Sumerian predecessor Enlil though, El is keen to be known and adored as the supreme god of his pantheon - sometimes as the only god at all.

As a supreme god he plays the traditional role of father and creator of gods, humans and animals. In clay tablets discovered at the ancient Canaanite city site of Ugarit (Ras Shamra in modern-day Syria), he is referred to by various epithets, including bātnyu binwāti (creator of creatures), ‘abū ‘adami (father of man) and abū banī ‘ili (father of the gods). Ugarit, however, did not have a temple to El - in the city’s mythology he lived in a tent at the spring of two rivers, on the mysterious Mount Lel (its name possibly means ‘night’, but could also potentially mean ‘air’). In multicultural Palmyra he was equated with the Greek god Poseidon, while in Byblos (modern-day Jbeil, Lebanon; the city for which the Bible is named and which El was believed to have founded) he was equated with the Greek Cronus. The husband of the great goddess Asherah, he is often described as being the father of 70 sons, sometimes more. He is often conceptualised as a warrior and counsellor, an older man in the prime of life, a king and a judge. Many texts describe El making a pact or covenant with humanity. In Sumerian mythology it’s Enlil who does this; in the Tanakh and the Old Testament of the Bible, it’s Yahweh (God). Both stories and promises relate to the flood myth: having wiped out all earthly creatures (apart from a single family and their animals, who have been warned about the flood and are aboard a large boat), El/Enlil/God promises not to do so again, and creates the rainbow as a token of this promise between god and humanity.

Another story conceptualises El as the father of Shachar and Shalim (Dawn and Dusk; here personified as sea gods who rise from the waves) after dallying with their mother on a beach, while a funny fragment of a clay tablet from Ugarit describes El throwing a party and having a drunken argument with the otherwise unattested deity Hubbay (who has horns and a tail). It ends with a recipe for a hangover cure!



This richly gilded statue of El, enthroned and dressed in kingly robes and a tall crown, was found in the ruins of Megiddo (Armageddon) in modern day Tel Megiddo, Israel

BA'AL: FROM GOD TO DEMON

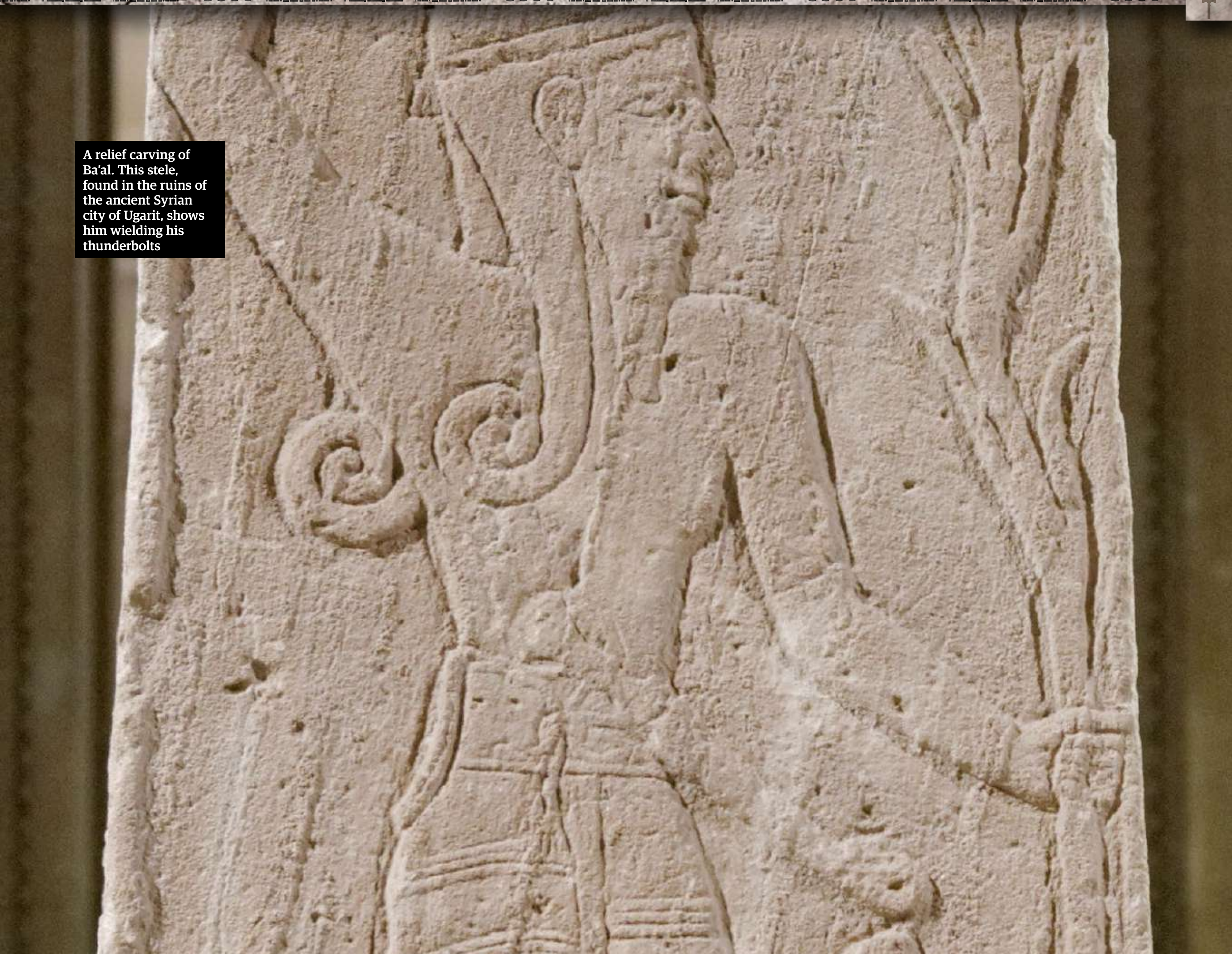
A SYNCRETISED SEASONAL GOD, WHO CAN RULE A RELIGION OR BECOME ONE OF ITS GREATEST ENEMIES

WRITTEN BY: APRIL MADDEN

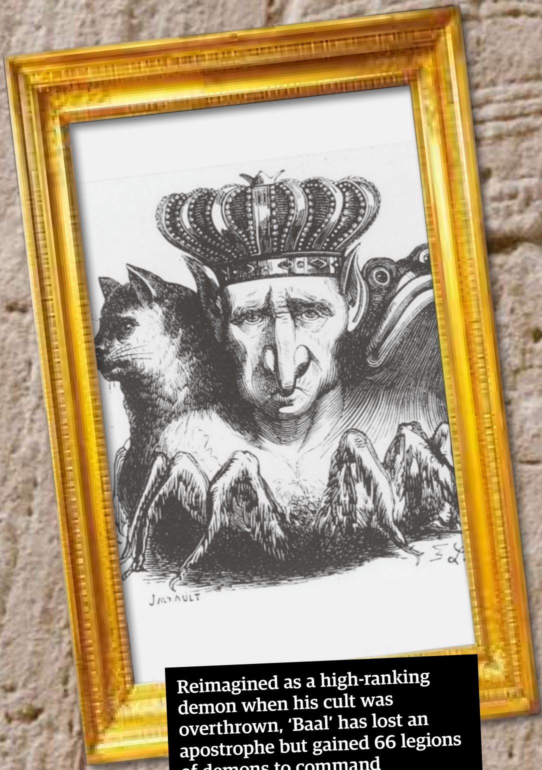
Like 'el', 'ba'al' was a generic word in Northwest Semitic languages, meaning 'lord', 'master', or 'husband' (within the context of one who carefully looks after a house, farmstead and livestock), although similar sounding words still mean husband (as in partner) in both modern Hebrew and Arabic today. Frequently applied to the most important sons of El, it eventually became closely associated with one of his favourite sons, rain and storm god Hadad, usually addressed as Ba'al Hadad. He is sometimes conceptualised as the son of Dagon, not El – one mythfrom the Syrian city of Ugarit features a complicated story in which El gives a pregnant concubine to Dagon as a gift, thereby making her son the child of both gods, legally at least.

In regions that were largely dependent on irrigation rather than rain for watering fields and nourishing crops, it's usually the stormy aspect of weather gods that was focused on, and Ba'al Hadad was no exception – he was equated with destructive weather, and his most common attribute was a thunderbolt. In areas where rain was relied upon more heavily, however, he comes to be syncretised with and even supplant his father El in the pantheon. The dry season was thought to be caused by him journeying to the underworld during the summer. The Ugaritic *Ba'al Cycle* tells of a myth in which Ba'al's brother, the sea god Yam, wants to be the ruler of the gods. Ba'al kills him, builds a palace and becomes the ultimate ruler himself, but is then killed by Mot, god of death. Ba'al's sister Anat then kills Mot in return. Ba'al and Mot both return from the dead and begin to fight again, until the Sun informs them that El, who previously supported Yam, has now switched sides and declared Ba'al to be the ruler of the gods. The myth is thought to be an analogy for the devastating effect of drought on a rain-dependant agricultural society, although there's debate as to whether it represents the cyclical nature of a dying and resurrecting vegetation god in relation to seasonal rainfall patterns or whether it preserves a folk memory of an unusual climactic event, when rain didn't fall in its proper season.

In regions in which El remained the predominant god and that later adopted monotheism, Ba'al was demonised under his epithet 'Ba'al Zebub' (Lord of the Flies), becoming the Judeo-Christian demon Beelzebub. 'Baal' is still mentioned as a demon in 17th century occult manuscripts, somewhat of a comedown for a once-great god.



A relief carving of Ba'al. This stele, found in the ruins of the ancient Syrian city of Ugarit, shows him wielding his thunderbolts



Reimagined as a high-ranking demon when his cult was overthrown, 'Baal' has lost an apostrophe but gained 66 legions of demons to command

GODS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS ARE PERHAPS BEST KNOWN FOR THEIR COMPLEX RELIGION, WHOSE HUNDREDS OF GODS WERE WORSHIPPED IN SOME OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR TEMPLES EVER

WRITTEN BY: DOM RESEIGH-LINCOLN

As early as 17,000 BCE, carvings of wild cattle alongside strange hybrid creatures at the site of Qurta in southern Egypt suggest an early belief in the hidden forces of nature. With Egypt's earliest stone sculpture at about 7,000 years old believed to represent a cow, it is clear this was an animal that played an important role in the lives of the early Egyptians. So too did their desert environment, in which the dominant Sun was worshipped as a variety of gods, much like the River Nile, whose annual life-bringing floodwaters were likewise venerated as divine.

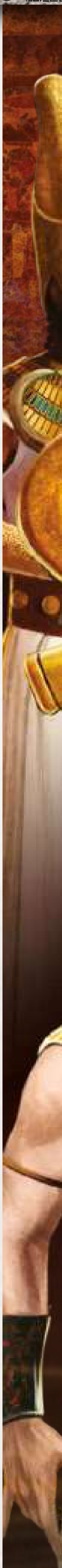
As these aspects of the natural world gradually developed into individual gods, each region of Egypt also had their own local deities whose characters evolved through stories and myths. One of the key myths for the ancient Egyptian people was the story of creation, when the primeval waters of chaos receded to reveal a mound of earth on which life first appeared.

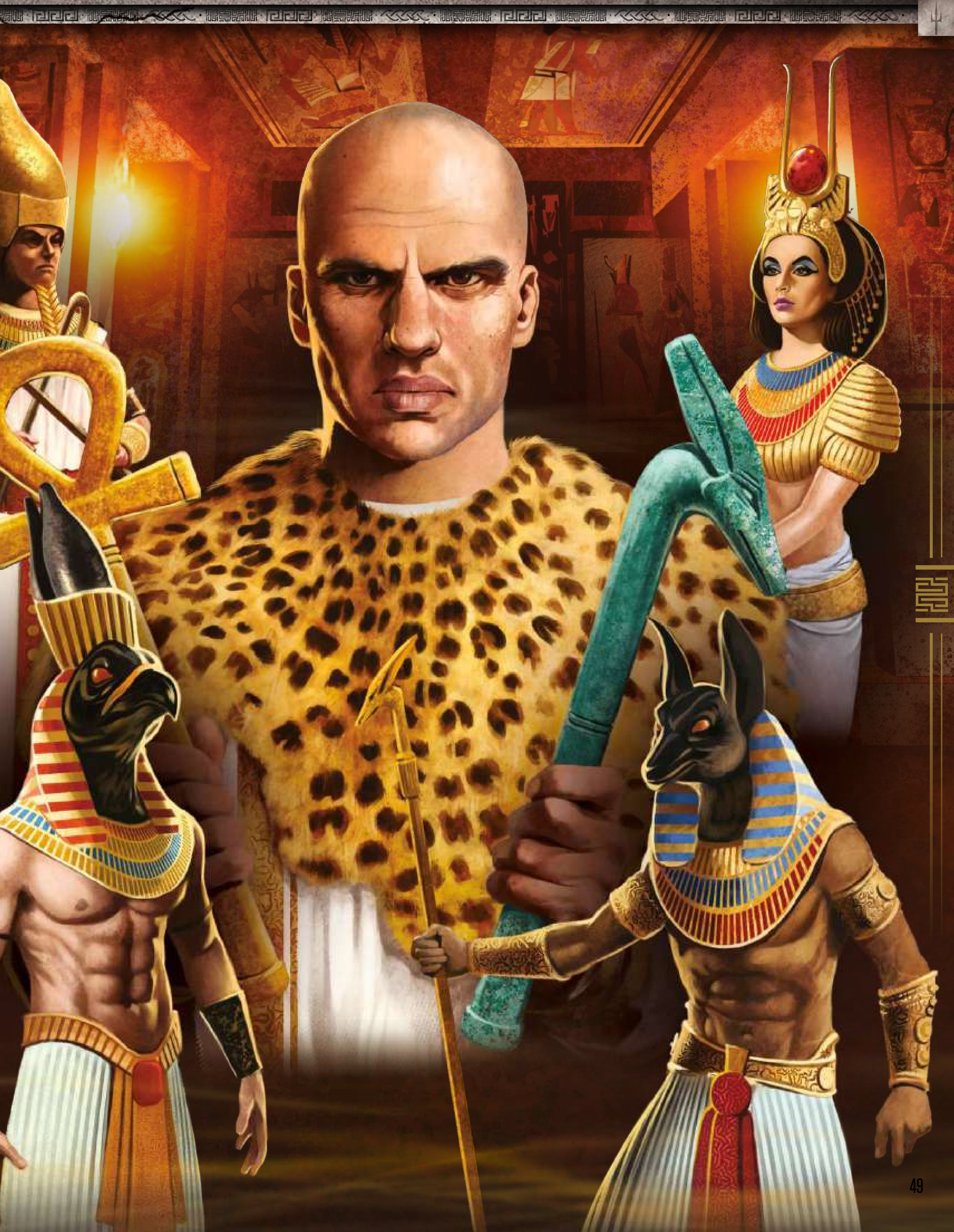
Yet with so many different deities throughout the Nile Valley, each region claimed that life had been created by their own local god. In Egypt's earliest capital, Memphis, their chief deity Ptah had emerged from the waters to summon up all living things by simply speaking their names, while at the nearby city of Sais, creation was regarded as the handiwork of the goddess Neith. Meanwhile at Hermopolis, life had been sparked into being through the combined energies of eight gods, four male frogs and four female snakes, while in the far south at Aswan, the ram-headed god Khnum had created all life on his potter's wheel.

But the most important creation myth centred on Heliopolis, where the supreme deity was the Sun god Ra. Worshipped as 'the Mother and Father of All', the Sun produced twin children Tefnut, goddess of moisture, and Shu, god of air, who in turn produced the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb, parents of twin couples Isis and Osiris, Seth and Nephthys.

With Isis and her brother Osiris claimed as Egypt's first rulers, they were succeeded by their son Horus, then the 'Followers of Horus', demigods who preceded the first human rulers, each of whom was regarded as the gods' child.

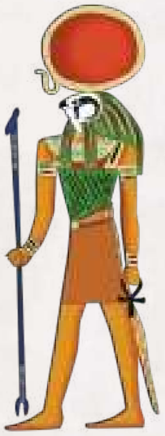
Over the subsequent 3,500 years of pharaonic history (c. 3100 BCE–395), Egypt's pantheon of deities continued to expand as more gods were introduced and some merged together, creating a complex and varied pattern of religion.





MEET THE GODS OF EGYPT

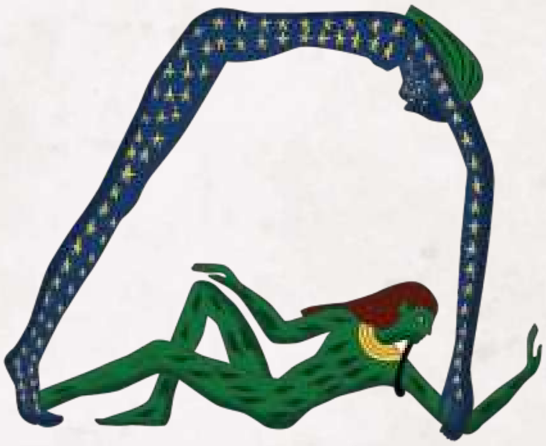
Almost 1,500 deities are known by name and many of them combine with each other and share characteristics. Here are some of the most important



Ra

God of the Sun

Ra was Egypt's most important Sun god, also known as Khepri when rising, Atum when setting and the Aten as the solar disc. As the main creator deity, Ra also produced twin gods Shu and Tefnut.



Geb

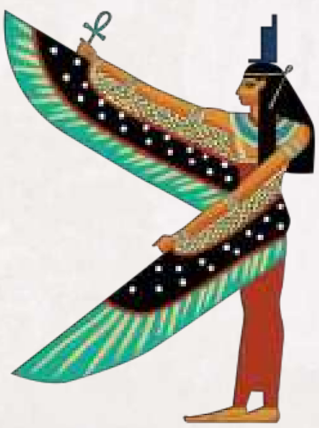
God of the Earth

As the grandson of Ra and the son of Shu and Tefnut, green-skinned Geb represented the Earth and was usually shown reclining, stretched out beneath his sister-wife Nut.

Nut

Goddess of the sky

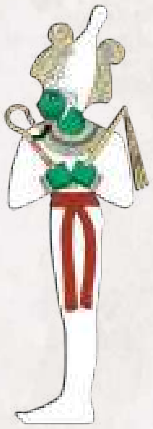
As granddaughter of Ra, Nut was the sky goddess whose star-spangled body formed the heavens, held above her brother Geb by their father Shu, god of air.



Isis

Goddess of motherhood and magic

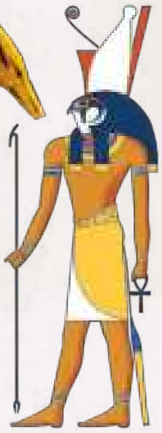
The daughter of Geb and Nut, Isis was the perfect mother who eventually became Egypt's most important deity, 'more clever than a million gods' and 'more powerful than 1,000 soldiers'.



Osiris

God of resurrection and fertility

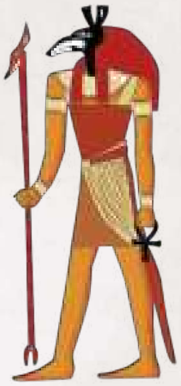
Isis's brother-husband Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, only to be resurrected by Isis to become Lord of the Underworld and the god of new life and fertility.



Horus

God of Kingship

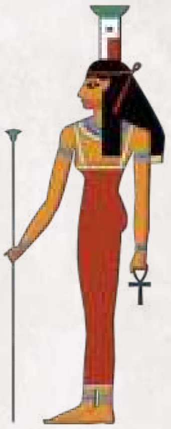
When his father Osiris became Lord of the Underworld, Horus succeeded him as king on Earth, and became the god with whom every human pharaoh was then identified.



Seth

God of storms and chaos

Represented as a composite mythical creature, Seth was a turbulent god who killed his brother Osiris, only to be defeated by Osiris's son and avenger Horus, helped by Isis.



Nephthys

Goddess of protection

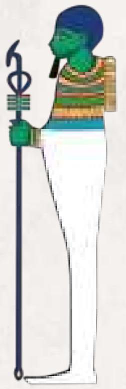
As fourth child of Geb and Nut, Nephthys was partnered with her brother Seth, but most often accompanied her sister Isis as twin protectors of the king and of the dead.

THE ANIMAL CULTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

The Egyptians greatly respected the natural world, particularly animals whose spirits were worshipped as divine. With Egypt's earliest known art representing animals alongside humans, various creatures were placed in human burials as early as c. 4000 BCE, and the relationship was a fundamental part of Egypt's evolving religion.

Gods could be portrayed entirely as an animal, or in human (anthropomorphic) form with an animal's head, as imitated by masked priests. Many deities also had a sacred creature, which was worshipped in life then mummified at death.

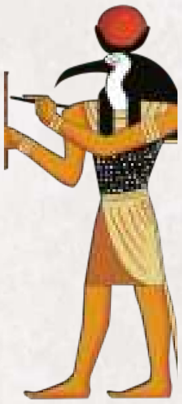
The most important of these was the Apis Bull of Memphis. Believed to house the soul of the creator god Ptah when alive, it was then worshipped as the underworld god Osiris after its death when the next bull was selected to continue the cycle. Other sacred bulls and cows were worshipped elsewhere in Egypt, with other animal cults including the sacred crocodiles of Sobek, representing the power of the king, and the sacred rams of the creator god Khnum. There were also the ibis and baboons representing the god Thoth, and the cats sacred to the feline deity Bastet. Such creatures were mummified in their millions as physical manifestations of the divine and symbols of Egypt's devotion to its creatures.



Ptah

God of creation and craftsmen

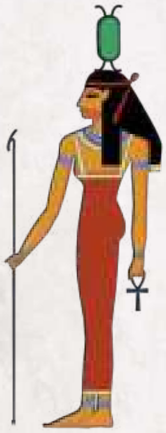
Ptah was a creator god and patron of craftsmen whose temple at Memphis, known as the 'House of Ptah's Soul' – 'hut-ka-ptah' – is the origin of the word 'Egypt'.



Thoth

God of learning and the Moon

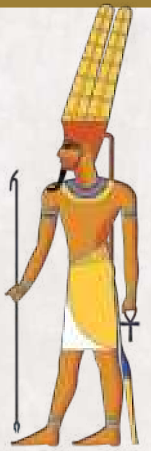
As the ibis-headed god of wisdom and patron of scribes, Thoth invented writing and brought knowledge to humans. His curved beak represented the crescent Moon, and his main cult centre was Hermopolis.



Neith

Goddess of creation

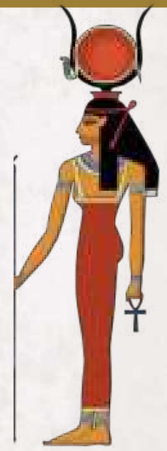
As a primeval creator deity represented by her symbol of crossed arrows and shield, warlike Neith, 'Mistress of the Bow', was worshipped at her cult centre Sais in the Delta.



Amun

God of Thebes

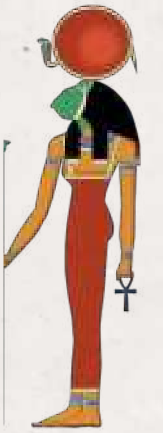
Initially the local god of Thebes, whose name means 'the hidden one', Amun was combined with the Sun god Ra to become Amun-Ra, king of the gods and Egypt's state deity.



Hathor

Goddess of love, beauty and motherhood

Often represented as a cow or a woman with cow ears, Hathor symbolised pleasure and joy and as a nurturing deity protected both the living and the dead.

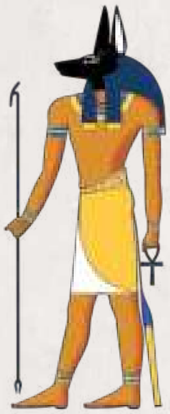


Sekhmet

Goddess of destruction

The lioness goddess Sekhmet controlled the forces of destruction and was the protector of the king in battle. Her smaller, more kindly form was Bastet the cat goddess, protector of the home.

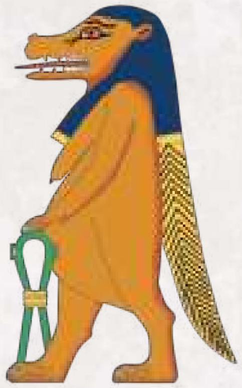
> "GODS COULD BE PORTRAYED IN ANIMAL OR HUMAN FORM, OR AS A HUMAN WITH AN ANIMAL'S HEAD"



Anubis

God of embalming and the dead

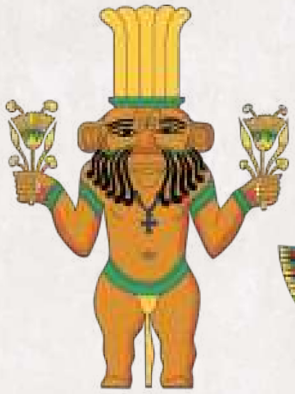
The black jackal god Anubis was the guardian of cemeteries and god of embalming, who helped judge the dead before leading their souls into the afterlife.



Taweret

Goddess of the home and childbirth

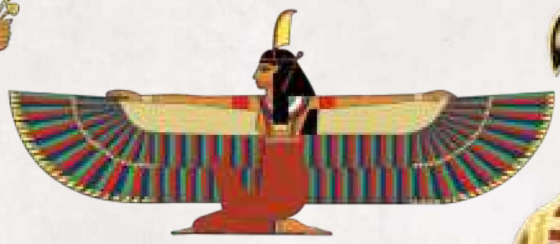
Taweret was a knife-wielding hippopotamus goddess who guarded the home, a protector of women and children who was invoked during childbirth to scare away evil forces.



Bes

God of the home and childbirth

Bes was a dwarf-like god of the household who protected women and children alongside Taweret, like her carrying knives for protection, in his case he carried musical instruments for pleasure.



Maat

Goddess of truth and justice

As the deity who kept the universe in balance, Maat's symbol was an ostrich feather against which the hearts of the dead were weighed and judged in order to achieve eternal life.

TEMPLES OF THE GODS

The Egyptians built temples as homes for their gods, believing their spirits resided inside their statues, to which a constant stream of offerings were presented by devotees

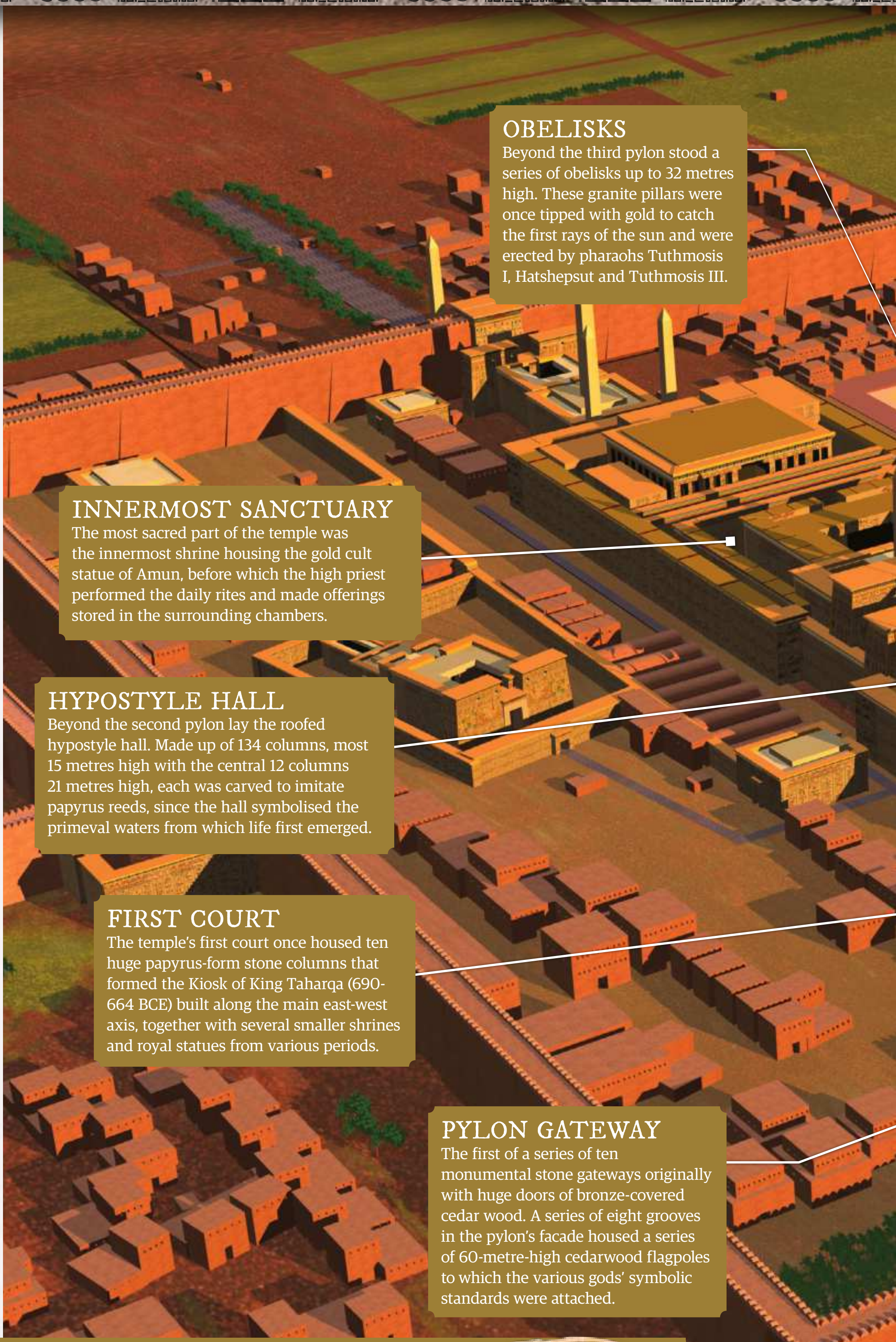
As early as c. 3500 BCE, the Egyptians built temples for their gods. Initially made of wood and reeds, these soon became permanent structures of stone that formed the centre of almost every settlement throughout the Nile Valley.

Evolving over time into ever more elaborate structures, the Egyptians aligned their temples to their environment, to the cardinal points, and to the movement of the Sun and stars.

Each temple's sacred space was also enclosed by a huge exterior wall of mud-brick, within which the temple itself was made up of a series of successive stone-built shrines and courtyards. Accessed through pylon-shaped gateways once flanked by tall cedar wood flag poles and secured by huge cedar wood doors, the temple walls were covered in brightly painted scenes of gods and kings, and like their floors and ceilings, often inlaid with precious metals and gemstones.

Then, to heighten the sense of reverence, the temple layout became progressively smaller and darker until reaching the innermost sanctuary, which housed the gods' cult statues. These were believed to contain the gods' spirits, before which daily rituals were performed to maintain the divine presence and satisfy the gods who would in turn protect Egypt. With the gods in residence, the temples became storehouses of divine power that could then be redirected through rituals for the benefit of the country.

To keep these sacred spaces ritually pure, only royalty and designated clergy were allowed inside - the majority of people were confined to the temple's outer areas, where the main administrative buildings were located. For Egypt's temple complexes were not only religious centres, but their outer precincts a combination of town hall, library, university, medical centre and law court - places where people came together for the purposes of community life, at the heart of which lay the spirits of the very gods themselves.



OBELISKS

Beyond the third pylon stood a series of obelisks up to 32 metres high. These granite pillars were once tipped with gold to catch the first rays of the sun and were erected by pharaohs Tuthmosis I, Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III.

INNERMOST SANCTUARY

The most sacred part of the temple was the innermost shrine housing the gold cult statue of Amun, before which the high priest performed the daily rites and made offerings stored in the surrounding chambers.

HYPOSTYLE HALL

Beyond the second pylon lay the roofed hypostyle hall. Made up of 134 columns, most 15 metres high with the central 12 columns 21 metres high, each was carved to imitate papyrus reeds, since the hall symbolised the primeval waters from which life first emerged.

FIRST COURT

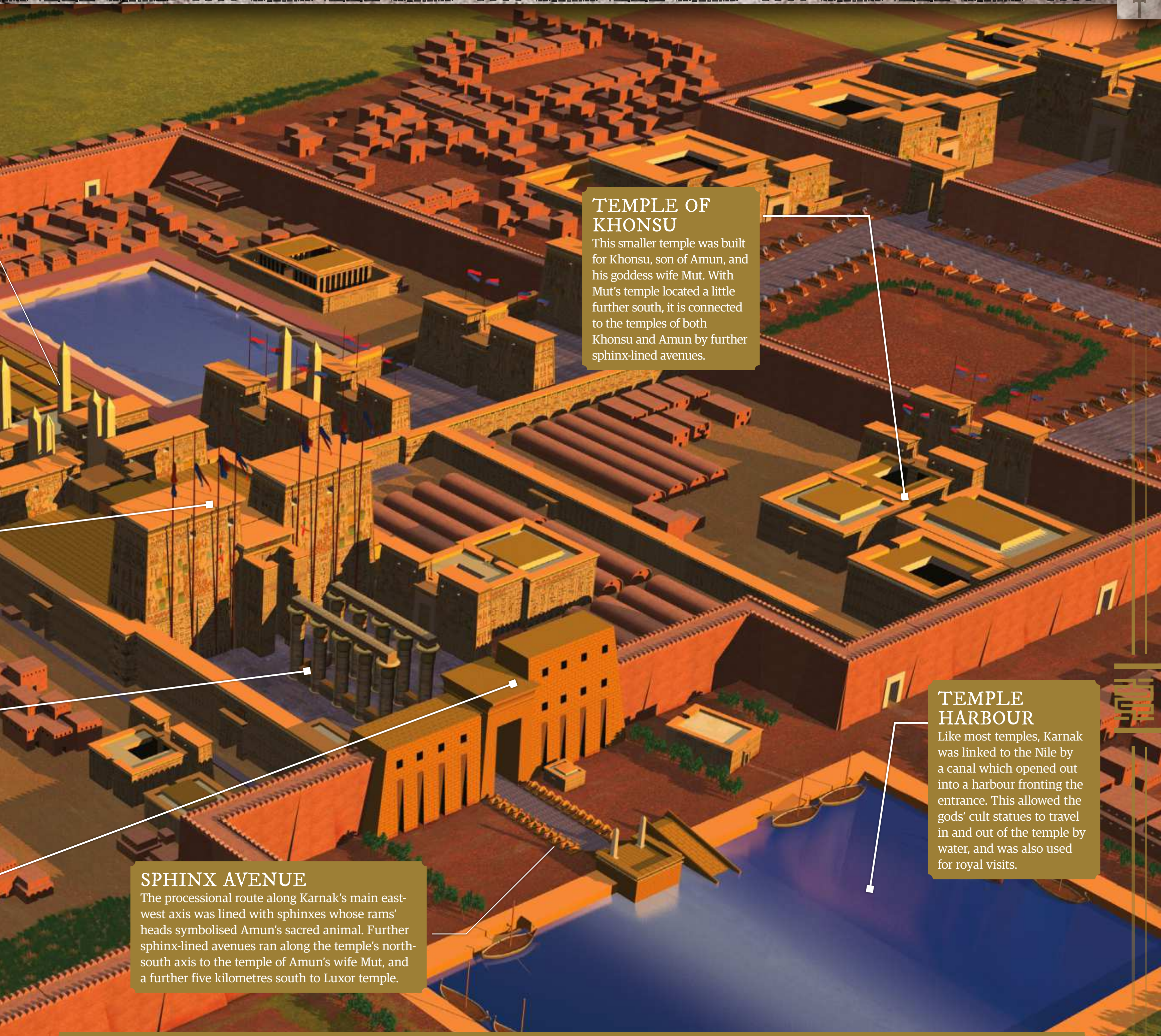
The temple's first court once housed ten huge papyrus-form stone columns that formed the Kiosk of King Taharqa (690-664 BCE) built along the main east-west axis, together with several smaller shrines and royal statues from various periods.

PYLON GATEWAY

The first of a series of ten monumental stone gateways originally with huge doors of bronze-covered cedar wood. A series of eight grooves in the pylon's facade housed a series of 60-metre-high cedarwood flagpoles to which the various gods' symbolic standards were attached.

WORSHIP BEYOND THE TEMPLES

With access to Egypt's temples restricted to royalty and clergy, the temples' outer walls sometimes incorporated shrines featuring images of 'listening ears'. These allowed the gods to hear prayers from the general population, with the Amun of Karnak praised as a god 'who comes at the voice of the poor', while the goddess Hathor 'listens to the petitions of every young girl who trusts in her'. People also worshipped at home within small domestic shrines, containing small busts of deceased ancestors and statuettes of favourite gods and past monarchs. The deified queen, Ahmose-Nefertari, and her son, Amenhotep I, were more popular than Amun at the workers' village Deir el-Medina. Families within the home also used magic.



TEMPLE OF KHONSU

This smaller temple was built for Khonsu, son of Amun, and his goddess wife Mut. With Mut's temple located a little further south, it is connected to the temples of both Khonsu and Amun by further sphinx-lined avenues.

TEMPLE HARBOUR

Like most temples, Karnak was linked to the Nile by a canal which opened out into a harbour fronting the entrance. This allowed the gods' cult statues to travel in and out of the temple by water, and was also used for royal visits.

SPHINX AVENUE

The processional route along Karnak's main east-west axis was lined with sphinxes whose rams' heads symbolised Amun's sacred animal. Further sphinx-lined avenues ran along the temple's north-south axis to the temple of Amun's wife Mut, and a further five kilometres south to Luxor temple.

THE FESTIVAL CALENDAR

The Opening of the Year (New Year's Day)
Month 1, day 1 (19 July)
The Egyptian New Year began with the start of the annual Nile flood, which brought water to the desert landscape and allowed crops to grow. With the floodwaters repeating the moment of creation, it was a time of national rejoicing when hymns claimed 'the whole land leaps for joy' and people threw flowers, offerings and even themselves into the water.

Opet Festival
Month 2, days 15-26 (September)
The Opet Festival began as an 11-day event when the cult statue of Amun was taken out of Karnak, accompanied by musicians, dancers, soldiers and the public. The procession travelled five kilometres south to the temple of Luxor, where the god's statue was joined by the pharaoh in secret ceremonies designed to replenish royal power, amidst feasting and rejoicing.

The Festival of Khoiak
Month 4, days 18-30 (November)
The Festival of Khoiak celebrated the life, death and resurrection of Osiris. Since this was based on the agricultural cycle in which the crops cut down were grown again, ceremonies included planting seeds in Osiris-shaped containers. It was celebrated when the Nile floodwaters were receding, leaving rich, black sediment on the riverbanks into which new crops were planted.

Festival of Bastet
Month 8, days 4-5
The cat goddess, Bastet, was closely linked to the lioness Sekhmet and cow-like Hathor, these deities' lively worship involving much singing, dancing and drinking – all key elements of Bastet's annual fertility festival. Boatloads of men and women would arrive at her cult centre Bubastis to celebrate, when it was reported that 'more wine is drunk at this feast than in the whole year'.

Festival of the Valley
New Moon, Month 10
At the annual Festival of the Valley, the cult statue of Amun was taken out from Karnak and across the Nile to Thebes's west bank. While it was here, the statue visited the tombs and temples of the previous kings that were buried there, accompanied by the local population, who would also visit the tombs of their own relatives to feast with their spirits and leave them food offerings.

Festival of the Beautiful Meeting
New Moon, Month 11
This festival celebrated the marriage between the god Horus of Edfu and goddess Hathor of Dendera. Beginning 14 days before the new moon, Hathor's cult statue was transported 70 kilometres south to Edfu temple, where it was placed beside the statue of Horus. 14 more days of festivities involved the participation of the royal family alongside the general population.

POWER OF THE PRIESTS

Ancient Egypt's priests were known as 'servants of god', who carried out religious rites before the gods' statues instead of a human congregation

Each successive pharaoh was regarded as a child of the gods, and as the gods' representative on Earth, was also the supreme high priest of every temple. However, with so many different temples throughout Egypt, the pharaoh's duties had to be delegated to each temple's high priest, who was often a royal relative selected by the king to guarantee their loyalty.

Within large temples like Karnak or Memphis, the power of the priests was considerable, since the temples owned much land and the temple treasuries were very wealthy. The priests also controlled the gods' cult statues, which functioned as oracles, whose pronouncements were interpreted by the priests, and could pass judgment in legal cases and even influence royal succession. At times when the crown was weak, the high priests' powers became so great that some took on additional roles as military generals, whose struggles with the monarchy could lead to civil war.

Yet most of the time the priests carried out their role, helping the king maintain strong relations with the gods whose spirits were believed to dwell within their cult statues. Housed in the sanctuary at the innermost part of the temple, it was here that the high priest led daily rites, assisted by a staff of male and female clergy, from the 'god's wife' priestess to the deputy high priest who oversaw supplies of offerings and the temple scribes who kept accounts and composed ritual texts. There were also lector priests who read out these texts, temple astronomers or 'hour priests' who calculated the correct timings for rituals, and temple dancers, singers and musicians who entertained the gods and impersonated them in ritual dramas wearing masks and elaborate costumes. Other staff included the temple gardeners, brewers, bakers and butchers who supplied the daily offerings, the temple weavers, jewellers, barbers and wig makers who supplied both the gods and their clergy, and the numerous craftsmen, carpenters and builders who undertook building work, carried out repairs and kept the temples in good order. In fact so numerous were such personnel that eventually over 100,000 people were employed in the upkeep of Egypt's three main temples of Karnak, Memphis and Heliopolis.

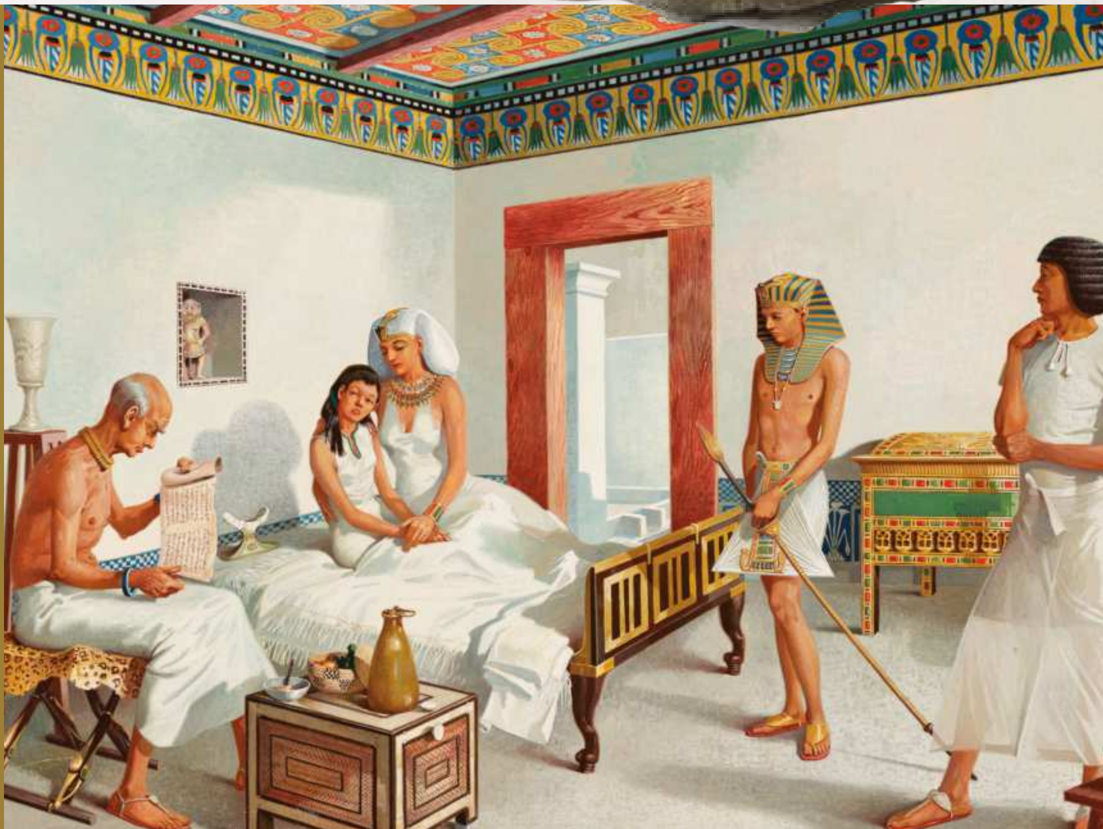
Priest Teti with his family: Teti is in the centre with his father the smaller figure on the left, also named Teti, and his mother, Meket, on the right

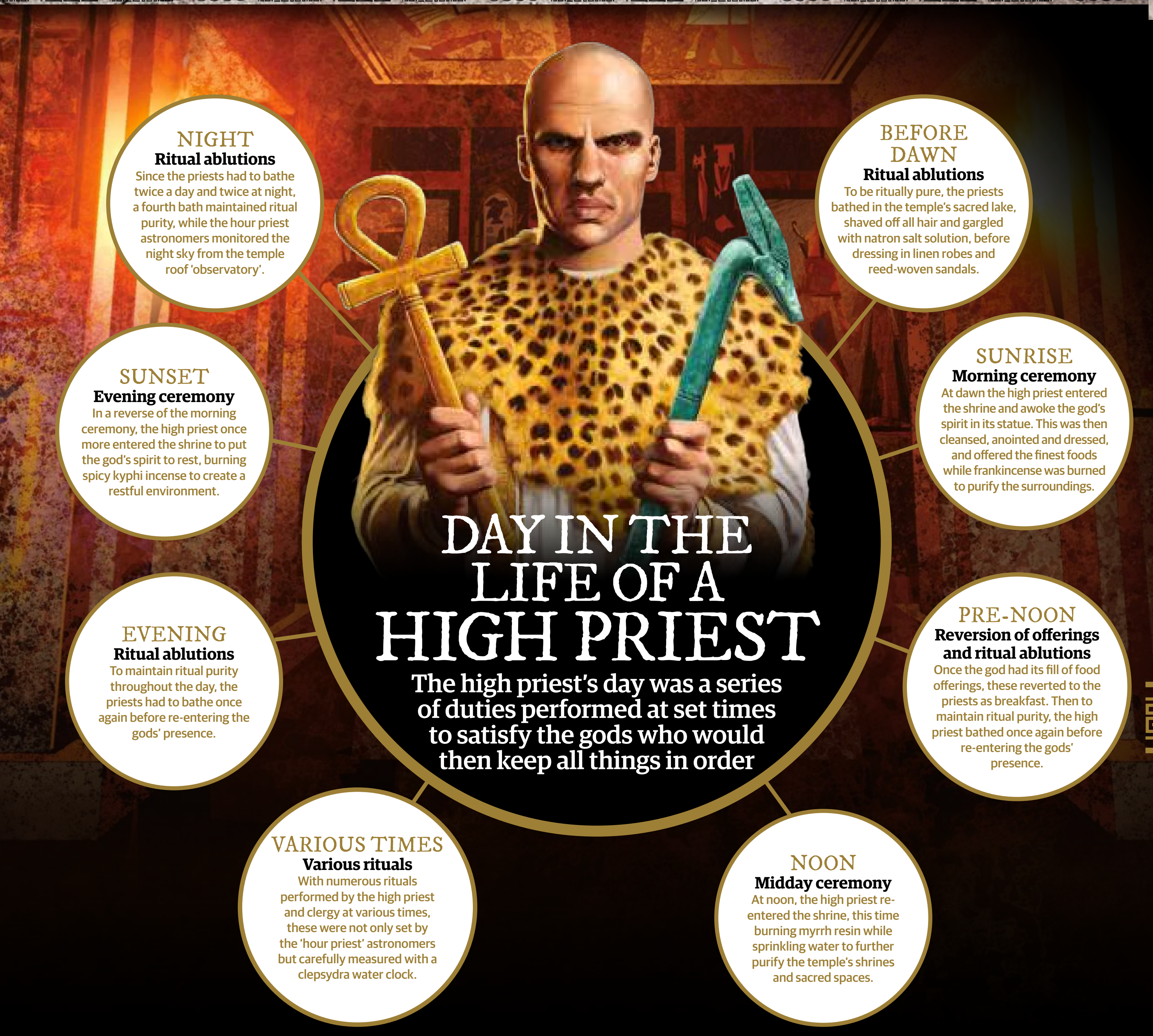
MAGIC AND MEDICINE

Ancient Egyptian religion and magic were indistinguishable, and hidden forces in both were regarded as the main cause of illness

◆

Although most communities had part-time medical men and 'wise women', people also slept in the temple's medical centre (sanatorium) in the hope they would be cured through divinely inspired dreams. These were interpreted by the priests, some of whom were also doctors. Since goddess Sekhmet controlled the forces of disease, her priests, believed capable of calming her, were therefore doctors specialising in diseases. Priests of the scorpion goddess Selket, patron of healers, cured bites and stings, while childhood illnesses were treated by invoking the mother goddess Isis, whose magic appears in various prescriptions including 'a remedy which Isis prepared for the headache of Ra'. Even deified mortals were believed to have such powers, from the polymath Imhotep, claimed as a son of the god Ptah and later identified with the Greek god of medicine Asclepius, to the court official Amenhotep.





DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HIGH PRIEST

The high priest's day was a series of duties performed at set times to satisfy the gods who would then keep all things in order

BEFORE DAWN

Ritual ablutions

To be ritually pure, the priests bathed in the temple's sacred lake, shaved off all hair and gargled with natron salt solution, before dressing in linen robes and reed-woven sandals.

SUNRISE

Morning ceremony

At dawn the high priest entered the shrine and awoke the god's spirit in its statue. This was then cleansed, anointed and dressed, and offered the finest foods while frankincense was burned to purify the surroundings.

PRE-NOON

Reversion of offerings and ritual ablutions

Once the god had its fill of food offerings, these reverted to the priests as breakfast. Then to maintain ritual purity, the high priest bathed once again before re-entering the gods' presence.

NOON

Midday ceremony

At noon, the high priest re-entered the shrine, this time burning myrrh resin while sprinkling water to further purify the temple's shrines and sacred spaces.

VARIOUS TIMES

Various rituals

With numerous rituals performed by the high priest and clergy at various times, these were not only set by the 'hour priest' astronomers but carefully measured with a clepsydra water clock.

EVENING

Ritual ablutions

To maintain ritual purity throughout the day, the priests had to bathe once again before re-entering the gods' presence.

SUNSET

Evening ceremony

In a reverse of the morning ceremony, the high priest once more entered the shrine to put the god's spirit to rest, burning spicy kyphi incense to create a restful environment.

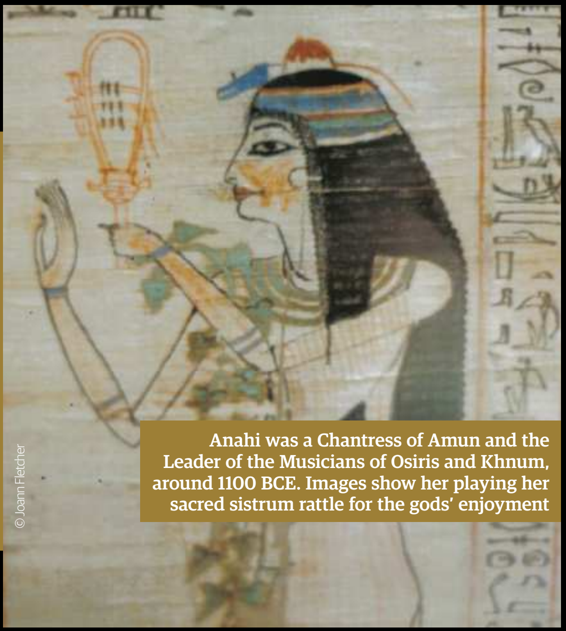
NIGHT

Ritual ablutions

Since the priests had to bathe twice a day and twice at night, a fourth bath maintained ritual purity, while the hour priest astronomers monitored the night sky from the temple roof 'observatory'.

PRIESTESSES

Women were priestesses to both goddesses and gods, undertaking similar roles to their male counterparts and receiving the same pay. The most common priestess title was 'chantress', with some women impersonating goddesses in rituals and the wives of high priests holding the title 'leader of the musical troupe'. Although most high priests were men, as were the lector priests who read out sacred texts, women held both these offices at times. Yet the most important priestess was the 'God's Wife', a title held by a succession of royal women acting as the human consort of the god Amun at Karnak. The God's Wife led sacred processions with the king or his deputy the high priest, and like them could enter the innermost shrine to make offerings to keep the gods content. She also took an active role in defending Egypt by magical means, shooting arrows into ritual targets and burning images of enemies. As the role brought great wealth and prestige, kings appointed their sisters or daughters as God's Wife to enhance their own status. Eventually regarded as the equivalent of a king, shown with kingly sceptres, these women could delegate on the king's behalf, both within the temple and in matters of state.



Anahi was a Chantress of Amun and the Leader of the Musicians of Osiris and Khnum, around 1100 BCE. Images show her playing her sacred sistrum rattle for the gods' enjoyment

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THE GREEKS & THEIR RELIGION

ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION WAS DIVERSE, CONTRADICTORY, AND ENDLESSLY INVENTIVE, MUCH LIKE THE GREEKS THEMSELVES

WRITTEN BY: MARC DESANTIS

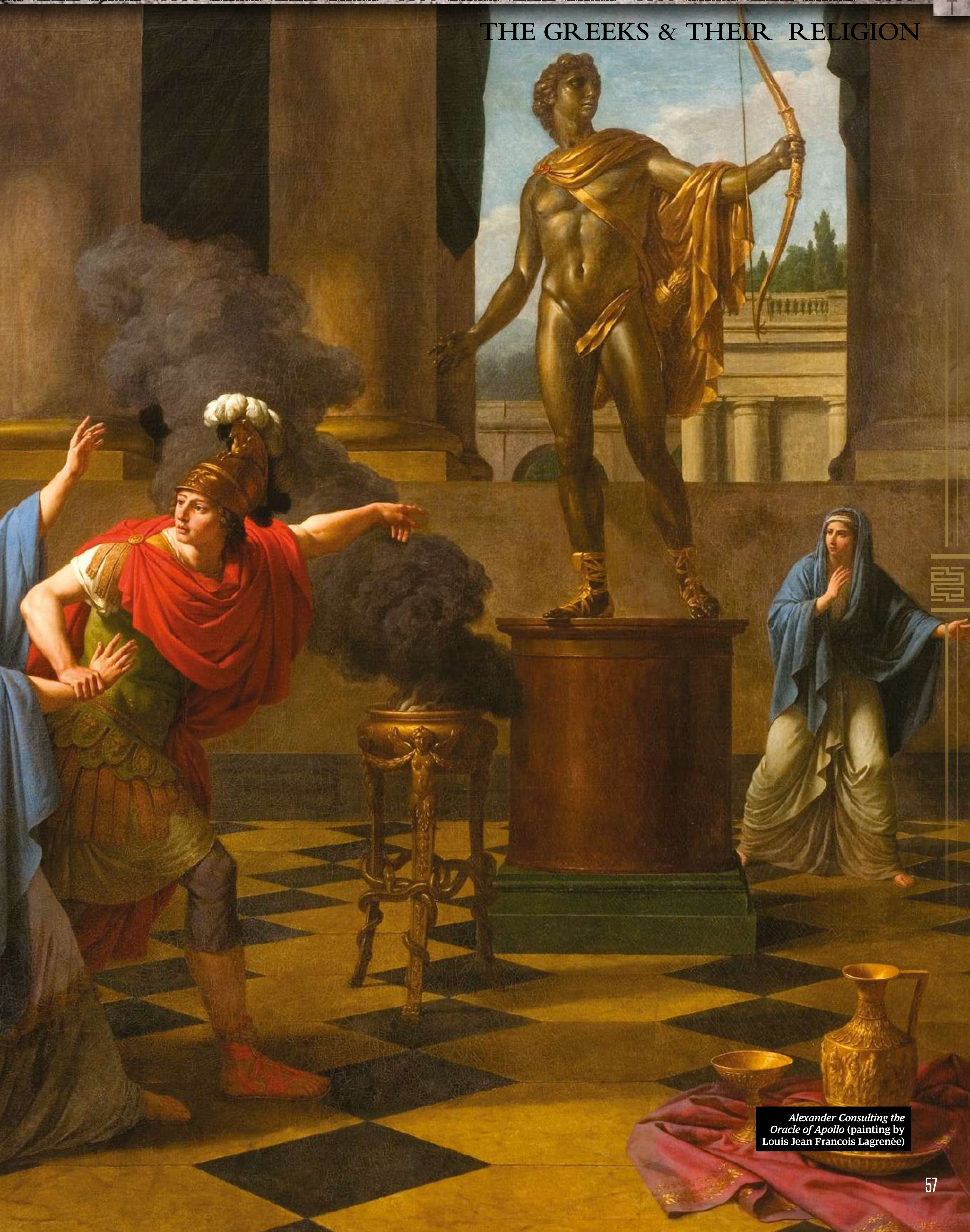
Greek religion had no formal set of beliefs or practices to which all had to conform or accept. The Greeks had their mythological stories, many of which were shared all over their country, but they did not develop a rigorous system of beliefs about them. The Greeks, for example, had no one sacred text, such as the Bible, at the core of their religion. Often Greek myths differed from place to place, as well as the particular stories that were told about the gods and heroes.

Sometimes these stories were wildly contradictory of others. Several gods had clearly overlapping areas of authority that could not be reconciled. Greek mythology was the product of centuries of unregulated storytelling by some of history's most creative and innovative people. Their myths explained the origins of the gods, the nature of the world in which the Greeks lived, and what they believed to be their history. If their mythology might appear to be lacking coherence at times, that is a modern judgement that would have puzzled the Greeks themselves. Their mythology had changed and evolved just as they had.

Furthermore, unlike the case in modern times, the ancient Greeks lacked a concept of a clear division between the realm of religion and that of non-religious life. For them, it was a seamless whole, with the gods, of which there were many, demanding and receiving the worship and sacrifice delivered by both the state and by private individuals regularly.

In fact, the Greeks had no specific word for 'religion' as we might understand it. Religion was simply part of their everyday life. Rituals were conducted at all important public and private events and a deity was routinely consulted before any major undertaking. A fortunate result in one's life was often responded to with a votive offering to a god, vows of thanks, or some other public form of recognition of the particular deity to whom success was owed.

There were 12 major gods and goddesses of the Greeks. These were the Olympians, so named because they reside atop Mount Olympus. Zeus was the lord and master of them all. Hera, his wife (and sister) was his queen. With him also was Aphrodite, goddess of love, bright Apollo, and his virgin



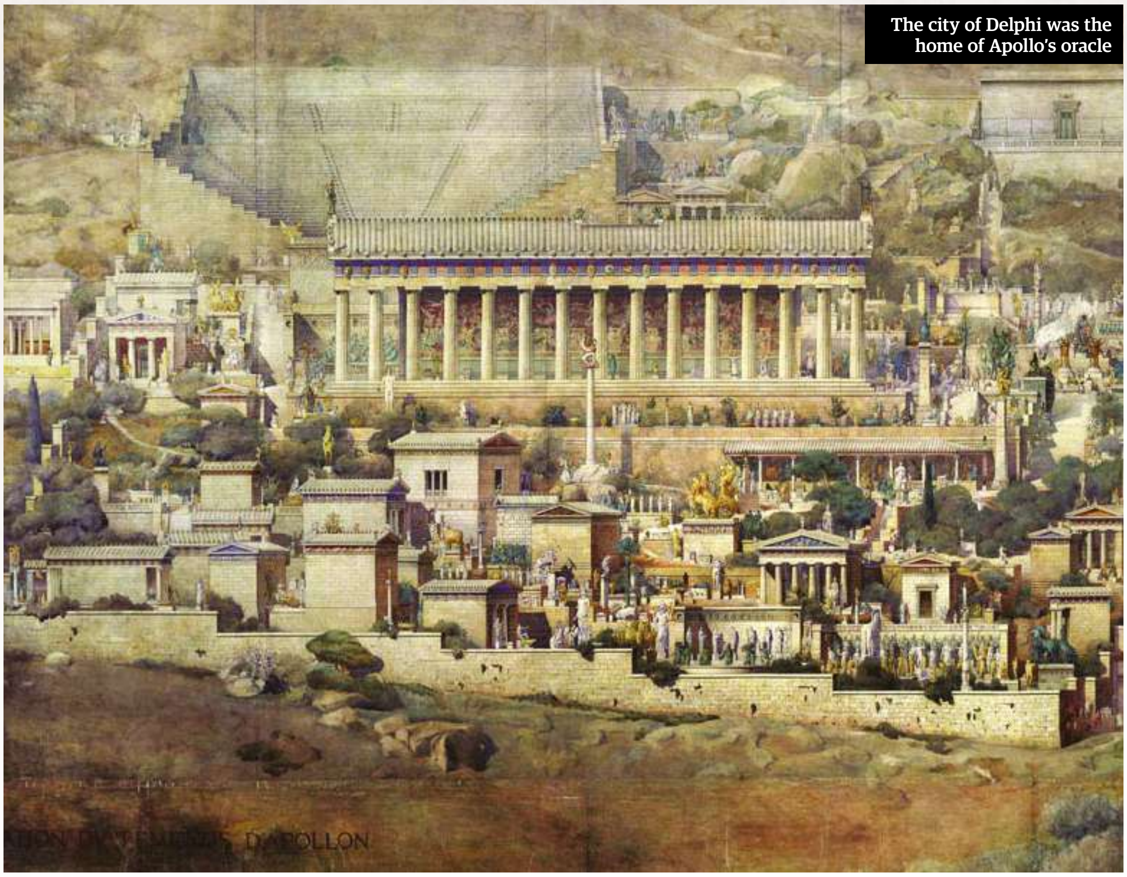
Alexander Consulting the Oracle of Apollo (painting by Louis Jean Francois Lagrenée)

THE OLYMPIC GAMES

One festival that was attended by Greeks of all the cities was the Olympia in honour of Zeus Olympios (of Mount Olympus). First recorded as taking place in 776 BCE at Olympia, the Olympic Games were held every four years and only the Greeks were allowed to attend them. The games initially involved just one event, a foot race, but over time, several other competitions were added to the Olympic programme for the competitors.

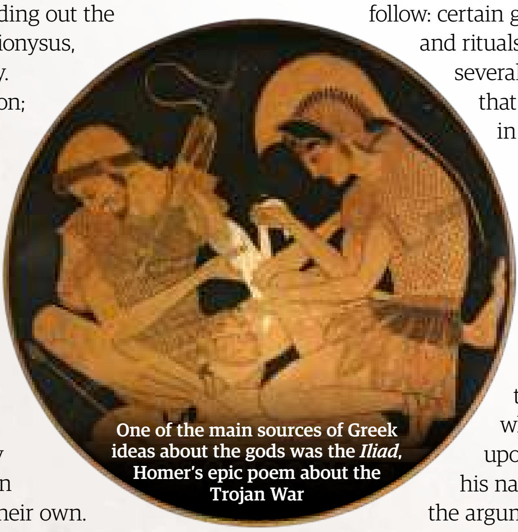
Though it was an athletic competition, the religious nature of the festival was always present. The Olympia began with sacrifices and prayers offered to Zeus. Next, all of the competitors swore an oath before Zeus' altar and statue. Breaking this oath might result in a stiff fine or disqualification. There were then two further public sacrifices, with one conducted on the day of the full moon and the second performed on the last day of the festival.

While the games were being held, all of the states of Greece were bound to observe an armistice. This sacred truce was implemented so that competitors and others travelling to watch the games could attend them without fear of harm befalling them.


The city of Delphi was the home of Apollo's oracle

sister Artemis the huntress. Demeter, goddess of growing things, was there also. Athena there was, the goddess of wisdom and patroness of heroes. Hephaestus too was an Olympian. He was the lame but matchless smith of the gods. Hermes was Zeus' fleet-footed messenger. Brutal Ares was the lord of war, while Poseidon was the god of the sea and its creatures. Rounding out the Olympian pantheon was Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Dionysus was a later addition; earlier pantheons instead feature the hearthfire goddess Hestia.

In addition to the mighty Olympians, the Greeks had hundreds of lesser deities. Having so many gods of their own meant they were relatively open-minded when it came to the gods of non-Greeks. They readily identified or equated foreign gods with similar ones of their own. They had no cause to deny the existence of anyone else's gods. The easy-going attitude toward the deities of foreign peoples did not mean the Greeks were unserious about religion. Religious practices were taken very seriously. Treaties between city-states were solemnised by oaths sworn by the gods as well as sacrifices. Breaking a treaty might bring about a disaster.


One of the main sources of Greek ideas about the gods was the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem about the Trojan War

The gods of the Greeks had their own priests and priestesses. These men and women oversaw the rites performed in honour of the gods and tended their temples, shrines, and sanctuaries. They did not involve themselves with the spiritual concerns of the worshippers. There was little in the way of formal doctrine for priests to know or follow: certain gods had certain rites and rituals, but there were also several features to worship that all ancient Greeks had in common.

PRAYING

Prayers were the usual means by which people communicated with the gods. The primary parts of a prayer were the invocation, in which the person called upon the deity using his name, title, and abode; the argument, in which the supplicant gave reasons to the god as to why he should help, which might include a recitation of good deeds performed by the mortal or making a note that the god was known for his helpfulness; and the prayer itself, which was a request for some kind of divine aid. Many kinds of relief might be sought, such as an end to sickness or drought.

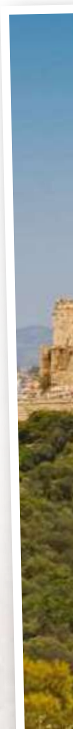
PURIFICATION

The cleansing of the community from pollution (or miasma), was of enormous importance to the Greeks. Private individuals might be purified by washing. Often purification was undertaken before some important action or perhaps as required by the calendar. The Athenian Assembly underwent ritual purification before the beginning of a meeting by having a sacrificed piglet carried around the members. Sometimes a community might undergo a mass purification driving out human scapegoats.

Ritual purification could be effected by washing or sprinkling. Fumigation was also used, along with seawater and water drawn from a sacred spring. Sacrifices would also suffice for purification, with the blood of the victim used to wash away the pollution of an unclean person.

SACRIFICES

Sacrifices were of vast importance in Greek worship. Both animals and vegetables were seen as appropriate sacrifices to the gods. With animals, the victim was brought to the altar of a god in a procession where it was sprinkled with water. These drops caused the animal to nod, which to the Greek mind was its acceptance of its sacrifice. Hair was then cut from the animal and a prayer was said to indicate what the sacrificer wished for in return for the sacrifice. The animal was dispatched via a cut to the throat and its meat divided out into portions. The first was for the god. The second, the entrails, were roasted and



eaten by the participants of the sacrifice. The rest of the meat was then boiled and given out to those present at the ritual.

FESTIVALS

Festivals were important parts of Greek public religion. Hundreds of public religious festivals were held every year by the various communities of ancient Greece. About one in every three days of the year was devoted to a festival of one kind or another. Though particular practices and the deities most prominently honoured might vary from city to city, celebrating their religion was a central element that served to distinguish Greeks from non-Greeks.

The basic features of a festival were the procession, the sacrifice, and the feast. Outside of these, local practices could differ widely. Most festivals owed their origins to agricultural rituals carried out to ensure a bountiful harvest. They were typically held seasonally, with the Thesmophoria held in honour of Demeter mostly taking place in the autumn.

> “THERE WERE 12 MAJOR GODS AND GODDESSES OF THE GREEKS. THESE WERE THE OLYMPIANS”

Another important festival was the Great Dionysia held annually in Athens. Athens was particularly fond of festivals, and was said to have held twice as many as any other city in Greece. Plays formed an important part of the Dionysia, with four days devoted to such presentations, three for tragedies while the fourth and last was reserved for comedies.

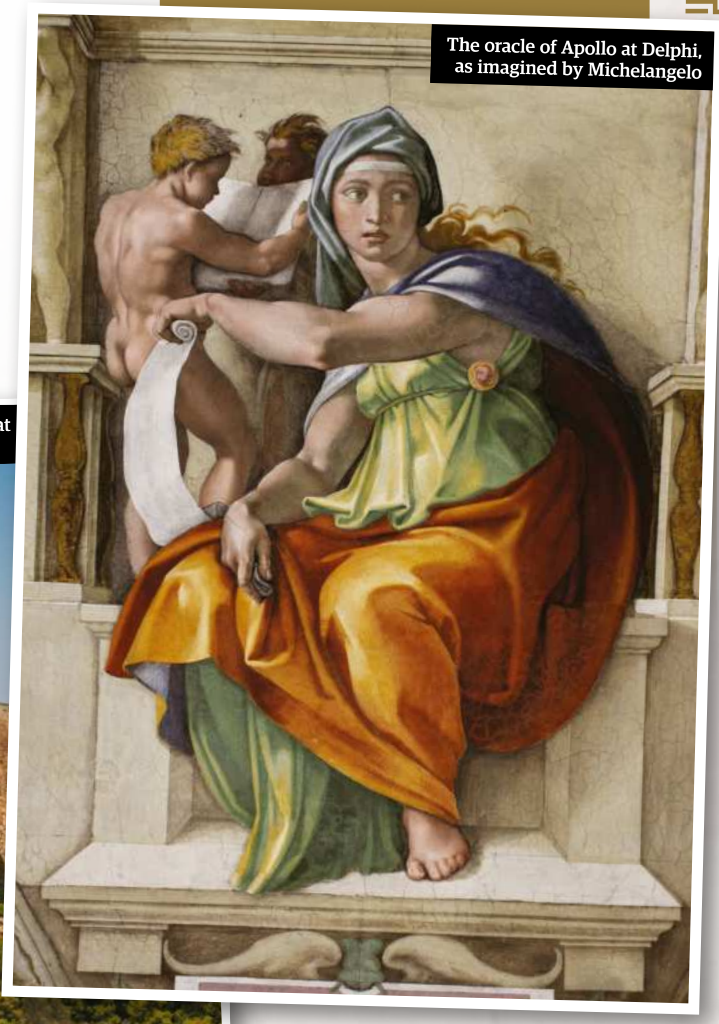
ORACLES

As might be imagined, with sickness and death ever-present in ancient times, the Greeks were often very anxious about the future. The reasonable desire for reassurance led many to seek out advice from the gods, which was obtained through their oracles. There were ten such oracles who foretold the future, after a fashion, for mortal men. Foremost among these was the oracle of Delphi, where the Pythia, a priestess of Apollo, delivered her pronouncements on behalf of the god. In words attributed to Apollo himself, the very purpose of the construction of his temple there was so that he could give ‘unfailing advice through prophetic responses’ in it. Another famous oracular shrine was that of Zeus found at Dodona in Epirus. Questions put to the god’s oracle were often very personal, such as whether the supplicant should get married or make a voyage across the sea. The response was usually simply yes or no.

Sometimes the answers could be more complicated and have major consequences. Right before the mighty Persians invaded Greece for a second time in 480 BCE, the Athenians consulted the oracle at Delphi. The Athenians knew that their situation was dire, and some were even considering packing up and leaving for safety in Italy. The historian Herodotus tells us that the priestess Aristonice told them that ‘only the wooden wall shall not fall.’ This baffling response was open to many interpretations, but Themistocles, the leading man at Athens, cleverly interpreted this to mean that they would have to rely on their navy, the ships themselves being made of wood, to fend off the Persians. Sure enough, the Athenians would go on to lead the combined Greek fleet to a great naval victory at Salamis soon afterward.

CROSSING OVER

The Greeks believed that the dead needed help in crossing the boundary between the world of the living and Hades, the gloomy realm of the dead. Those left behind sought to bury the dead as quickly as they could, or else the unburied dead would be condemned to roam for many years along the banks of the Styx, the river that marked the boundary between them and Hades. The retrieval of the bodies of the dead and their proper burial was of tremendous importance to the living. In 405 BCE, ten Athenian admirals won a great naval victory at Arginusae but failed to collect the corpses of their slain sailors on account of a storm that came up suddenly. On their return to Athens they were put on trial for dereliction of duty despite having won the battle. Several of the admirals were executed. Within days of death, the body was to be buried, with the corpse being carried to the place of burial. Both bodily burial and cremation were available, with cremation thought to be more prestigious. The ashes of the dead were placed in an urn which was itself then buried. Most Athenian burials took place on the roads leading out of the city. Burials inside the city were not allowed because of a wish to avoid pollution by the dead. After interment, the graves were not forgotten, but were tended to regularly by the surviving relatives, especially by the women of the family.



The oracle of Apollo at Delphi, as imagined by Michelangelo

The Parthenon was the great temple of Athena in Athens

THE TWELVE OLYMPIANS

THE GODS OF OLYMPUS WERE A FRACTIOUS FAMILY OF GLORIOUS, MAJESTIC, SCHEMING AND TREACHEROUS DEITIES

Zeus

Lord of Olympus

Mighty Zeus was the lord and king of the Olympian gods, and father of many gods and heroes. His domain was the sky and he was master of the weather. His animal was the eagle, the greatest of all birds. Zeus was the most powerful of all the gods – perhaps even stronger than all of them put together – yet he was not invincible, and he could not defy the wishes of his divine brethren with impunity.

Zeus oversaw oaths and hospitality, while his divine radiance was enough to burn mere mortals to ashes. He also had a roving eye and would have many amorous trysts with nymphs and other women who were not his wife. Through Danaë he would father the hero Perseus, slayer of serpent-crowned Medusa; he also fathered Heracles, destined to become a demigod on Olympus, and Helen, the most beautiful woman of all. Zeus had many other dalliances, and Hera, his wife, would seek vengeance for her humiliation by afflicting the women Zeus seduced.

Hermes

Messenger of the gods

Son of Zeus by the nymph Maia, Hermes was the god of messengers and travellers. He acted to guide others to their destinations. In the *Iliad*, he brings King Priam of Troy through the Greek lines to meet with Achilles to recover the body of his slain son, Hector. When Hera, Athena and Aphrodite needed to find their way to Mount Ida to participate in the judgment of Paris, it was Hermes who led them to their destination. It was also Hermes who conducted Persephone out of the Underworld and back to Demeter in the world of the living.

Poseidon

Lord of the sea

Poseidon was the full brother of Zeus and son of Cronus. When the three brothers, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, overthrew their father, Poseidon took the sea as his realm. Like the sea, Poseidon could be placid one moment and raging the next, and his weapon and symbol of authority was the three-pronged trident. The vengeful Poseidon ensured that the Greek hero Odysseus would be delayed for years in returning to his home island of Ithaca for his blinding of the sea god's son, the Cyclops. He was responsible for earthquakes, and was known as Earth-shaker among the Greeks.

Dionysus

God of wine and revelry

Dionysus was the god of wine and vine. The son of Zeus by the mortal woman Semele, worship of him by his devotees was among the most startling of all the Greek gods. Women figured prominently in his cult. The leaders, known as maenads, partook in ecstatic, sometimes violent, rituals in which they engaged in frenzied dancing and tore wild animals to pieces. Greek women would attend his ceremonies by going into the hills to engage in processions led by the maenads. There they would drink themselves to stupefaction in the Bacchanalia.

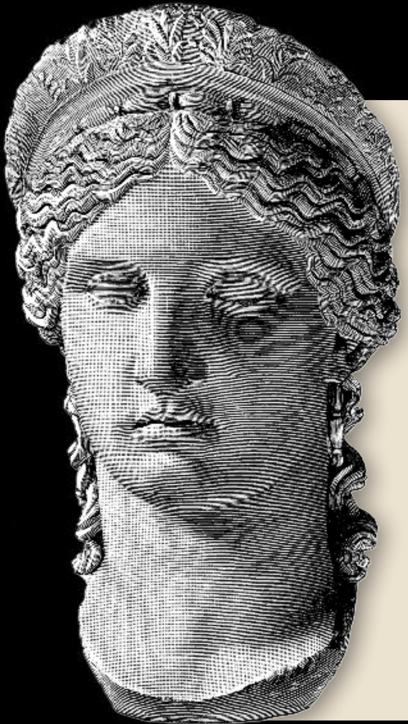
Athena

Goddess of wisdom and war

Athena, goddess of wisdom, was the daughter of Zeus by the goddess Metis. The bright goddess was the deity of civilisation, as well as a patroness of many Greek heroes. In the *Iliad*, we find her siding with the Greeks against the Trojans during their ten-year war in which she directly intervened to help them. One significant form of assistance comes at the beginning of the *Iliad* where she restrains the warrior Achilles from killing Agamemnon. In the *Odyssey*, we see her helping another favourite, Odysseus, make his way from Troy to Ithaca.

Athena was also the patron deity of Athens, the greatest of all Greek cities. In the 5th century BCE, the Athenians would build the Parthenon, the most magnificent of all temples, dedicated to her.

The goddess was noble in aspect and demeanour, but could be harsh to those who displeased her. Tiresias had the misfortune to espy her while she bathed, and she struck the poor man blind for his transgression against the gods.



Hera

Queen of the gods

Glorious Hera was both the wife and sister of Zeus, and queen of the gods. Her purview was marriage and motherhood, but despite her position as wife to Zeus, she was hardly the happiest of spouses. Her husband's philandering ways made her extremely jealous and she had a particular hatred for Heracles, Zeus's son by the mortal woman Alcmene. Hera constantly sought to avenge her humiliation by Zeus by afflicting Heracles, who had really done her no harm. She despatched two snakes to kill the boy when he was just an infant, but she found her murderous plan thwarted when little Heracles killed them both. She later made him go mad, and while he was insane, he killed his wife and children.

Hera could be murderously jealous of Zeus's lovers themselves, too. She persuaded Semele, the mother of the god Dionysus, to insist that Zeus appear to her in his full divine splendour. Reluctantly, he did so, and the poor woman was reduced to ash by his overpowering radiance.

Apollo

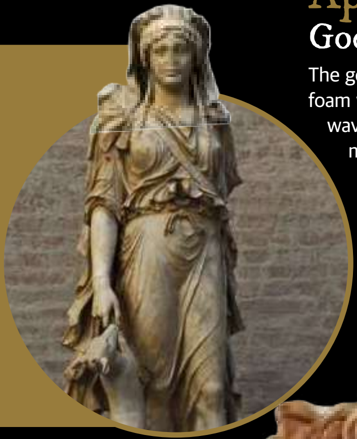
God of music, healing and prophecy

Handsome Apollo had his two main cult centres in Greece at Delphi and on the island of Delos. Delphi was home to his chief oracle and priestess, the Pythia, also known as the Oracle of Delphi. There at his shrine she would receive petitioners seeking to question her about the future. The weapon of Apollo was the bow. When his priest Chryses was mistreated by the Greeks at Troy, he struck down many of them with plague-carrying arrows. He was also said to pull the Sun behind him in his airborne chariot, and was sometimes given the name Phoebus, meaning 'bright'.

Artemis

Virgin goddess of the hunt

Artemis was the twin sister of Apollo and daughter of Zeus by Leto. She was a virgin huntress – often depicted carrying a bow and arrows – and also the patroness of women undergoing childbirth. Being the goddess of virginity and a protector of young girls, she fiercely guarded her own modesty. When the unlucky hunter Actaeon stumbled upon her while she was bathing in a sacred spring, the goddess, outraged at having been seen unclothed, turned him into a stag for his transgression. His own hounds promptly tore him limb from limb.



Ares

God of war

War in all its fearsome brutality was represented by Ares. He was the son of Zeus by his queen, Hera, but was little liked by his father and the other gods. The Greeks themselves had little love for the deity on account of the horrors that war brought with it.

One goddess that did favour Ares, though, was Aphrodite, the love goddess, with whom he fathered four children, but she was at the time already married to Hephaestus. Two of these children were Phobos (Fear) and Deimos (Terror), each representing concepts closely associated with war.

Demeter

The goddess of growing things

The goddess of the Earth, motherhood, fertility and the harvest was known as Demeter. As the ultimate source of the grain that the Greeks used to make their bread, she was enormously important to them. Her main festival was the Thesmophoria, held every autumn to ensure a good harvest.

Demeter figures prominently in the explanation for the seasons, and thus the annual cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth seen in the natural world. The story begins when Hades, lord of the Underworld kingdom that also bore his name, stole the goddess' daughter, Persephone.

Hephaestus

The smith of Olympus

Hephaestus was the great smith of the pantheon. Unlike the other deities, who were physically perfect, Hephaestus was lame, and was thus the epitome of the outsider among the gods. He was cruelly mocked by the other gods for his deformity, though they admired the products of his hands as he was the patron of all who worked with metal. Learning that his faithless wife Aphrodite was making love to Ares, he made a magic net that fell upon them while they were abed. Thus trapped, he summoned the other Olympians to view and mock the adulterous pair.

Aphrodite

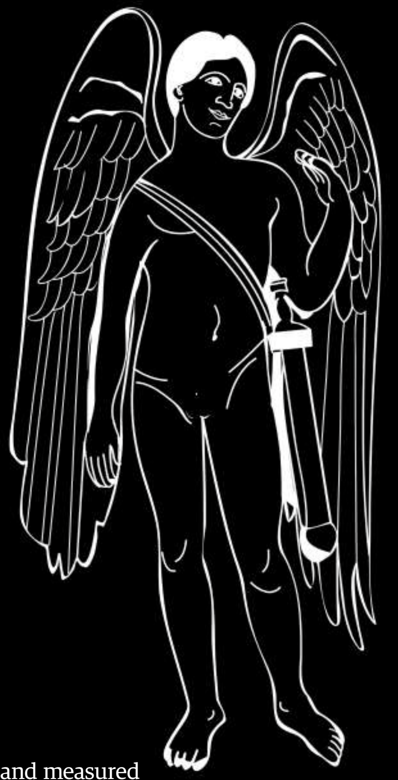
Goddess of love

The goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite was born out of the sea foam when Cronus tossed the severed genitals of Uranus into the waves, though another myth gives her a less gruesome birth and makes her the daughter of Zeus and the goddess Dione. Her major cult centre was Cyprus, where she is said to have been born. Oddly, the loveliest of goddesses was married to the ugliest of gods, Hephaestus the lame smith of Olympus. She was not faithful to him, and was once caught naked in bed with Ares, the god of war, by a magic net fashioned by her cuckolded and outraged husband.

Aphrodite figured prominently in the start of the Trojan War. When she, Hera and Athena each sought to claim the title of most beautiful, they had Paris, the son of the king of Troy, choose between them. Hera offered him power, Athena promised victory, but Aphrodite told him that she would make the most beautiful woman in the world his own.

DIVINITIES OF DEATH

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, THE DIVINE INHABITANTS OF THE UNDERWORLD WERE STRANGE, COLD, DARK, UNLOVABLE AND TERRIFYING, BUT THEY ALL HAD A ROLE TO PLAY



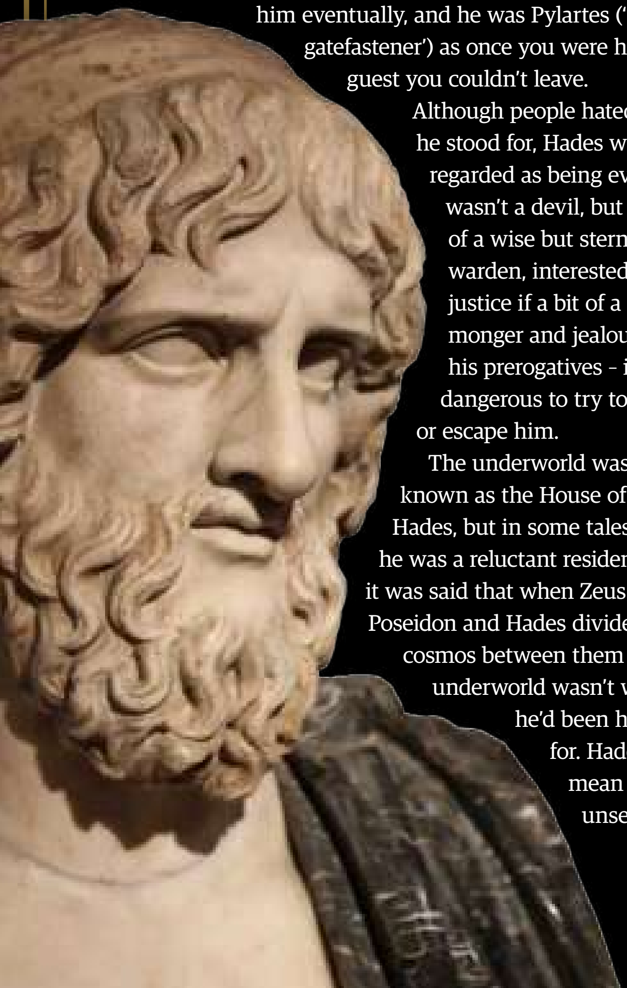
Hades
Ruler of the underworld

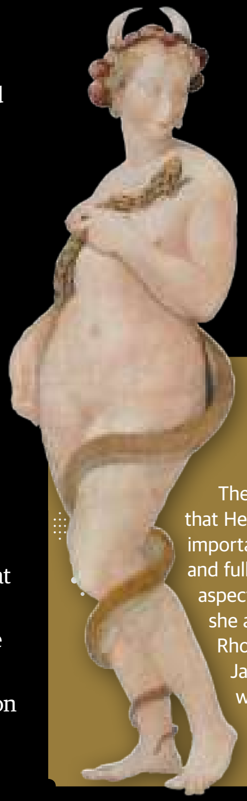
As the brother and equal of Zeus and Poseidon, and the lord of the underworld and king of the dead, Hades was among the grandest of the Olympian gods, but he was not often worshipped or invoked, and he rarely took centre stage in stories. In fact, Greeks disliked even saying his name, which was thought to be unlucky. They used all sorts of alternatives and euphemisms to avoid it.

Among other things, he was Pluto ('the rich') because as a god of the earth he helped make crops grow, hoarded precious metals and minerals, and was a creator of wealth, while with some bitter irony he was Polydegmon ('the hospitable') as all humankind came to him eventually, and he was Pylartes ('the gatefastener') as once you were his guest you couldn't leave.

Although people hated what he stood for, Hades wasn't regarded as being evil. He wasn't a devil, but more of a wise but stern prison warden, interested in justice if a bit of a rule-monger and jealous of his prerogatives – it was dangerous to try to cheat or escape him.

The underworld was known as the House of Hades, but in some tales he was a reluctant resident; it was said that when Zeus, Poseidon and Hades divided the cosmos between them the underworld wasn't what he'd been hoping for. Hades may mean 'the unseen'.





Thanatos
Fetcher of souls

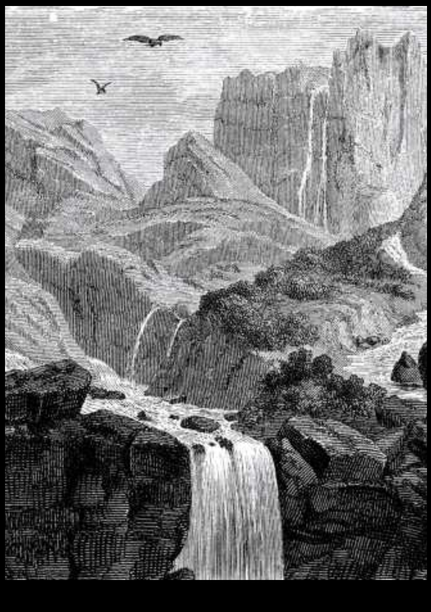
When the thread spun, cut and measured by the Moirai came to an end, Thanatos ('death') would come for you. He was the personification of death, the Greeks' Grim Reaper.

The son of Nyx ('night') and the brother of Hypnos ('sleep'), he was almost impossible to cheat, and it was perilous to try. Heracles, as always, was the exception, and was the only person to beat death. Although Sisyphus succeeded in tricking Thanatos, he later suffered everlasting torment as punishment.

Hecate
Goddess of fertility and witchcraft

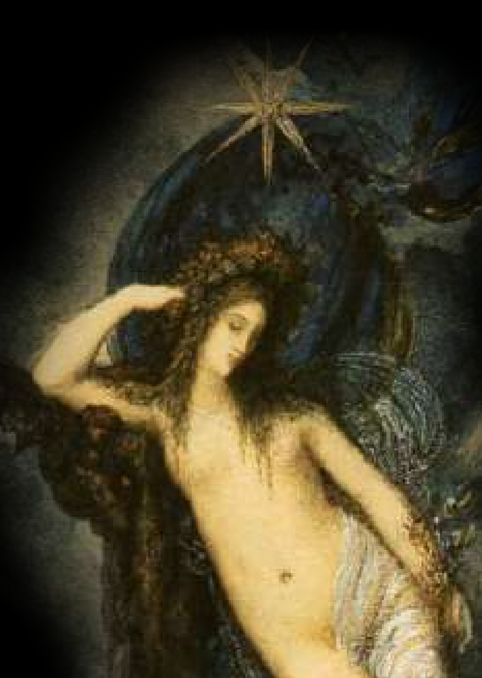
The ancient poet Hesiod thought that Hecate was one of the most important divinities, benevolent and full of gifts. This was her in her aspect as fertility goddess. When she appeared in Apollonius of Rhodes' version of the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, she was the dread goddess.

To an extent this demonstrates the association the Greeks made between the underworld, death and fertility, which makes a certain sense. It's also a good example of the variety and contradictions of their myths. Hecate was linked with infernal magic, necromancy, ghosts, herb lore and poison, favouring the night and places thought of as no man's land. However, Hecate was said to have been a sympathetic friend to Demeter and Persephone, who she helped guide to and from Hades. Hecate is accompanied by nymphs called Lampads, who carry lit torches.



Styx
Goddess of the river

Styx ('abomination') lived in a silver-pillared palace in the underworld, and was much respected by Zeus after she aided him in the war against the Titans. She was the ruler of the River Styx, which flowed from Mount Chelmos in Arcadia down into the Underworld, where it ran nine times round the kingdom of the dead. As a mark of respect, Zeus proclaimed that no oath sworn by the waters of Styx should ever be broken, and even divine oathbreakers were severely punished. Styx was said to be a daughter of Oceanus and Tethys.



Nyx

Goddess of night

Among the most ancient of Greek deities, Nyx ('night') was born of primordial Chaos. She was the mother of some of the most fundamental - and often terrible - gods and goddesses, many of them without male intervention. These included some of the underworld's most important divine inhabitants, not least Thanatos, and deities who were related to death in various ways, such as Hypnos ('sleep'), Oneiroi ('dreams'), Nemesis ('retribution'), Moros ('fate'), Ker ('doom') and Geras ('old age'). Nyx successfully defied Zeus when he wanted to expel Hypnos from Olympus, and was not to be trifled with.

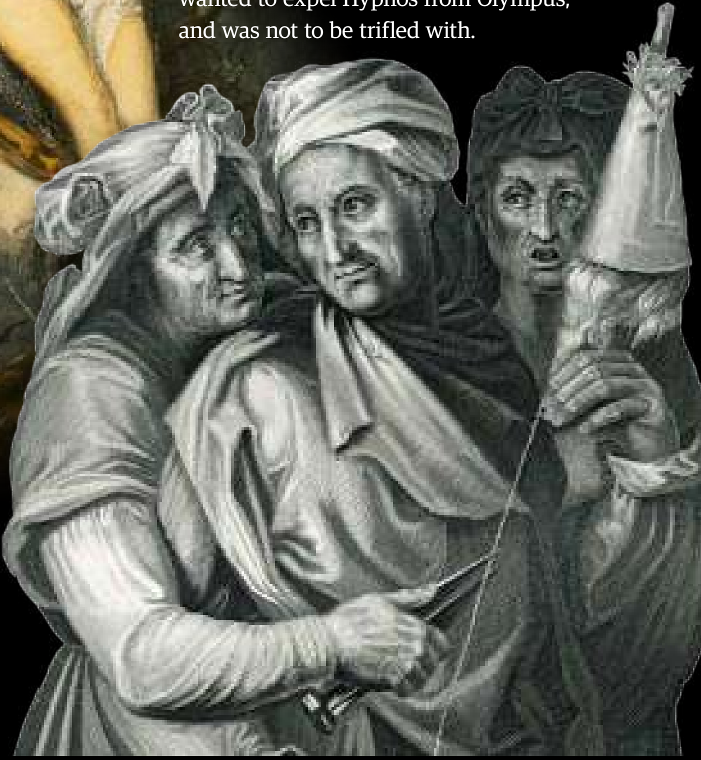
Persephone

Queen of the underworld

The daughter of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone was originally a grain goddess, like her mother. She became an eminent, if part-time, resident of the underworld after she was abducted by Hades.

Having persuaded his brother Zeus - but not his sister Demeter - that he should marry Persephone, Hades seized her in his chariot and took her to the underworld. When Demeter eventually found her abducted daughter, she was told that she could only bring her back if she hadn't eaten anything while in the House of Hades, but Persephone had eaten some pomegranate seeds. Zeus then pronounced a compromise settlement in which Persephone would marry Hades and live with him as queen of the Underworld for either four or six months a year - the stories vary - and then spend the remainder of her time in the upper realm. In the other myths in which she features, Persephone gives no sign that she objects to being queen of the dead, and she and Hades act together.

Persephone is one of the most allegorical divinities, with her time in the underworld symbolising the temporary death of winter, and her time in the upper world symbolising the return of fertility every year.



The Moirai

Guardians of destiny

Could anyone or anything stand up to, or even overrule Zeus? Possibly the Moirai ('allotters'), depending on who you listen to. The Moirai - generally called the Fates - were much older than the gods of Olympus, and were believed to determine, or at least record and supervise, personal destiny and things to come. When you were born, they would measure out your allotted lifespan and your fortune. Although it's not always clear and is sometimes contradictory in the myths, they didn't seem to make decisions; what they said was instead an impersonal expression of order and balance in the universe. Nor is it clear whether the gods were wholly subordinate to their rulings or could change fate - there are examples of both. Clotho ('she who spins'), Lachesis ('disposer of lots') and Atropos ('inevitable') were often pictured as old women, with one spinning out a thread for each person's life, one cutting it and one measuring it. The symbolism is clear enough, however ambiguous their role. In one story Apollo was said to have got round them by getting them drunk.

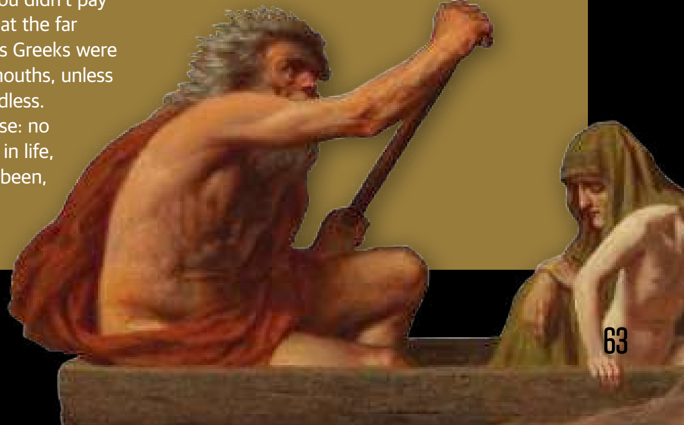
CHARON

The cantankerous boatman

The son of Erebus ('darkness') and Nyx ('night'), Charon received the souls of the newly dead, and conveyed them across the River Styx (or possibly Acheron) into the House of Hades. His reputation was as a squalid, grasping, ill-tempered old man. Although his occupation as a ferryman was regarded as being menial, he was important and had to be treated with respect; if you didn't pay his fee of an obol you would linger at the far shore of Styx/Acheron forever. Thus Greeks were always buried with a coin in their mouths, unless they were both penniless and friendless.

Charon served a symbolic purpose: no matter what your station had been in life, however rich and glorious you had been, all you could bring with you to the land of the dead was the fee for your passage into the House of Hades, and you had to pay that to a peevish old man of lowly station, who had you in his power.

Charon didn't always have his own way; Hercules forced him to ferry him across the Styx, after which Hades punished him by putting him in chains for a year.



THE GREAT GOD PAN

GOD OF THE WILD PAN IS THE FAUN OF A THOUSAND MYTHS, INCLUDING THE EVENTS THAT LED UP TO HIS FAMED DEATH…

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

There are many conflicting stories surrounding Pan's parentage, but all can agree he was taken in by the gods of Mount Olympus

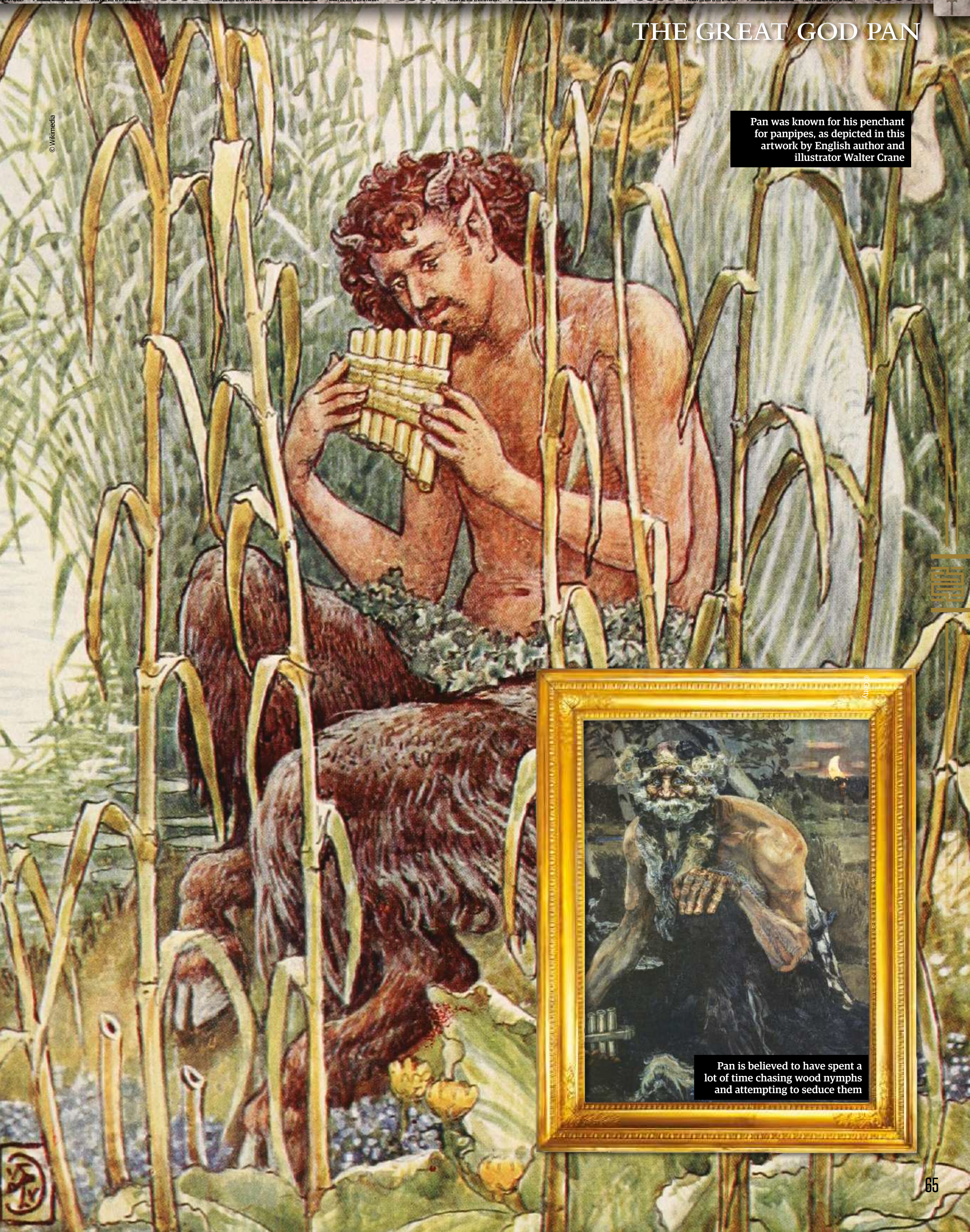
With the torso of a man and the legs and horns of a goat, Greek god Pan was the original faun. But even though Pan has featured in masses of artwork and literature, he is not considered to be one of the major gods of ancient Greece.

A god of the wild, shepherds and flocks, nature, mountain wilds, fields, groves, woodland glens and sex, Pan is associated with fertility and the season of spring. The fact that he was first worshipped in the rural areas of ancient Greece (namely rustic Arcadia) as opposed to the larger, more populated cities meant that he was one of the few gods that didn't have temples and monuments built in his honour. Instead, he was worshipped in nature, usually in caves and grottoes, with shepherds, hunters and mountain people being some of his most loyal and dedicated followers.

Pan's parentage has never been quite clear. Some believe him to be the son of Hermes while others reckon he was born to a wood nymph – the details change depending on who you ask – but the story of his birth is always the same. When Pan was born, his mother was so distressed by his appearance that she abandoned him in a state of shock. He was then taken to Mount Olympus, where he became popular with the gods.

Despite his unusual group of followers and unconventional beginnings, Pan often stands out for a different reason: according to Greek historian Plutarch, Pan is the only Greek god who dies. Featured in *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, the news of Pan's death came to Thamus, a sailor, from a divine voice, which said: "Thamus, are you there? When you reach Palodes, take care to proclaim that the great god Pan is dead." Once Thamus arrived in Palodes, the news was greeted with laments and thus the famed "Pan is dead" myth was born, sometime between 14 and 37 CE.

Many Christian apologists have since dissected the death of Pan, and suggested that with his death came the advent of theology. English theologist GK Chesterton explained: "It is said truly in a sense that Pan died because Christ was born. It is almost as true in another sense that men knew that Christ was born because Pan was already dead." Though the news of Pan's death spread like wildfire, some people believe that Thamus misheard the mysterious voice and that the god still lives on today, although slowly dying as the Earth is being destroyed.



© Wikimedia

Pan was known for his penchant for panpipes, as depicted in this artwork by English author and illustrator Walter Crane

© Getty

Pan is believed to have spent a lot of time chasing wood nymphs and attempting to seduce them

RELIGION IN ETRURIA

UNCOVER HOW THE GODS WERE WORSHIPPED AND REVERED IN IRON AGE ITALY

WRITTEN BY: KATHARINE MARSH

To us it is a civilisation shrouded in mystery – so much of the Etruscan way of life was overshadowed first by the Greeks and then by the Romans. What doesn't help is that no Etruscan literature remains for us to learn about how they lived, or who they worshipped. The only extant writings are inscriptions that, when viewed alongside art and archaeological remains, can give us an insight into this Iron Age civilisation, and they often seem to invoke the gods.

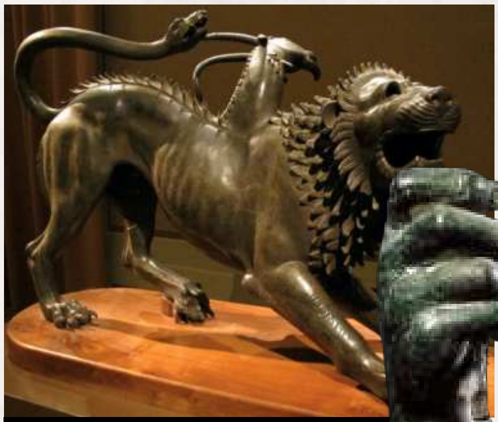
The deities of Etruria were plentiful, with every facet of life seemingly covered. There were gods of the sky, the afterlife and nature, as well as divinities whose domain covered war, love and boundaries, among a multitude of other things. At the head of the pantheon was Tinia, the equivalent of Zeus and Jupiter in the Greek and Roman pantheons respectively, and his role was to keep harmony among his subordinates. As in the other polytheistic religions of the time he had a consort, Uni, and their relationship is a perfect example of Greek influence on the pantheon.

We know incredibly little about Etruscan religion in its first 300 years, from its apparent advent with the civilisation in the 8th century BCE, but we do know that it had its own gods, its own mythology, and that depictions of deities were usually faceless. That all changed when the Greeks came to the Italian peninsula, bringing their stories of quarrelling gods and daring heroes with them.

In the 5th century BCE, Etruscan religion began to change. The once faceless divine figures on urns and other vessels became more human, and personalities began to develop. Tinia and Uni took on the mantle of the Etruscans' answer to Zeus and Hera, while some new gods were introduced like Apulu, who was Apollo but with a more Etruscan-sounding name.

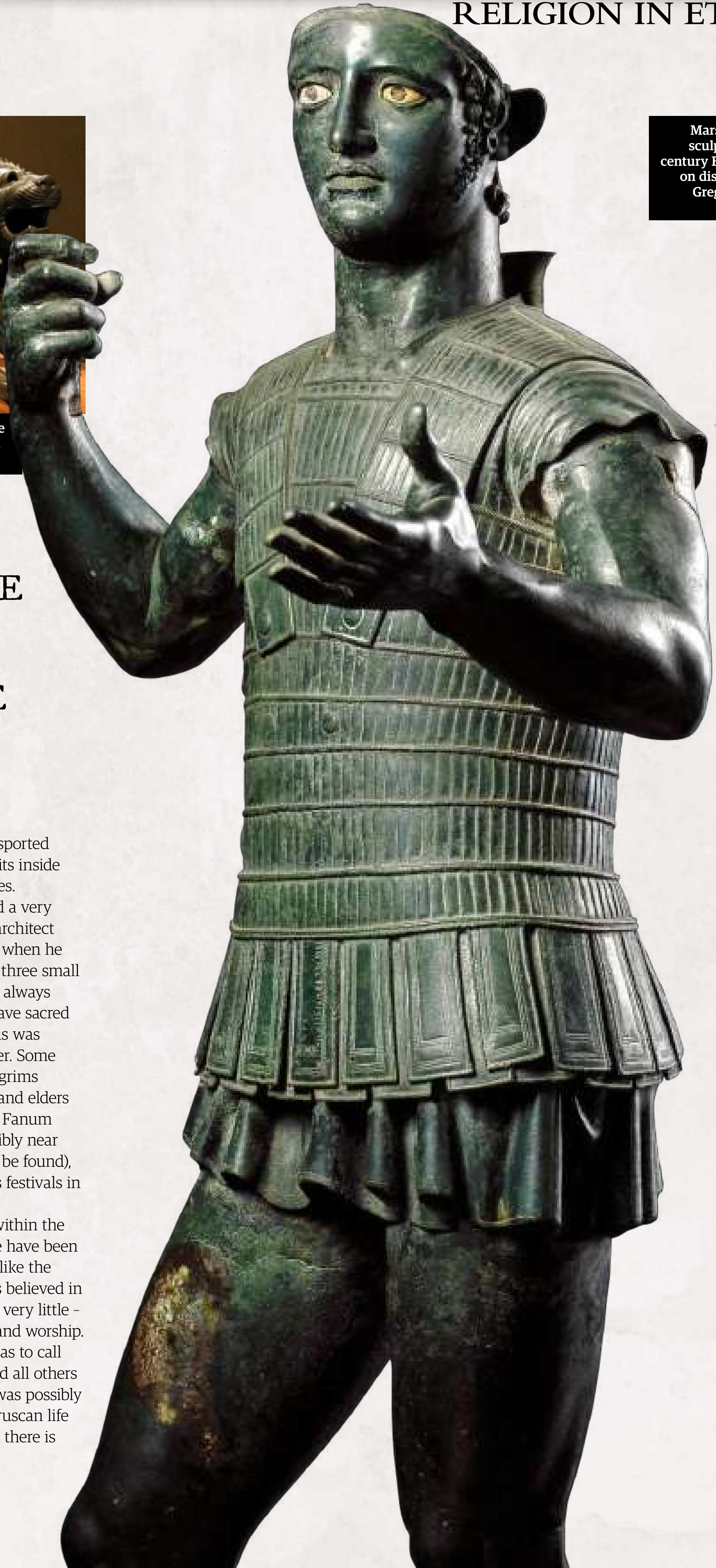
It was around this time that long-lasting temples started to appear across Etruria, although the two events are not necessarily linked. In the early days sacred sites had simply been open spaces, usually only featuring an altar or other kind of platform, before the advent of wood and thatch buildings of which nothing remains today. But now structures made of stone were springing up, with the earliest example being the temple at Veii – just outside Rome, which belonged to the Latins – and was constructed in about 600 BCE.

The building, which has become known as the Portonaccio Temple, was perhaps dedicated to Menrva, the Etruscans' answer to Athena and Minerva, and it was a typical religious building for the era. Outside stood a free-standing altar with a stone drain used for pouring libations into, while the temple itself was almost square. Columns created a veranda at the front of the building with steps leading up to the entrance, while there was



This bronze chimera was a gift to Tinia, the head of the Etruscan gods - the inscription on its right forearm is a dedication

Imagine Credit: J. Saliko



Mars of Todi, a bronze sculpture from the 5th century BCE. It is currently on display in the Museo Gregoriano Etrusco in Vatican City

Imagine Credit: Getty

“DEITIES WERE PLENTIFUL, WITH EVERY FACET OF LIFE SEEMINGLY COVERED”

another entrance at the side. The roof sported terracotta statues and antefixes, while its inside was decorated with mythological scenes.

Temples in Etruria seem to have had a very distinct style, with the famed Roman architect Vitruvius describing them as “Tuscan” when he wrote about them; all usually featured three small chambers at the rear inside with altars always outside. Every Etruscan town would have sacred sites and temples - usually three, as this was considered the most auspicious number. Some of them even attracted tourists and pilgrims from elsewhere in the Mediterranean, and elders of Etruscan cities met each year at the Fanum Voltumnae sanctuary, which was possibly near modern Orvieto (its remains are yet to be found), for one of the most important religious festivals in the Estrucan calendar.

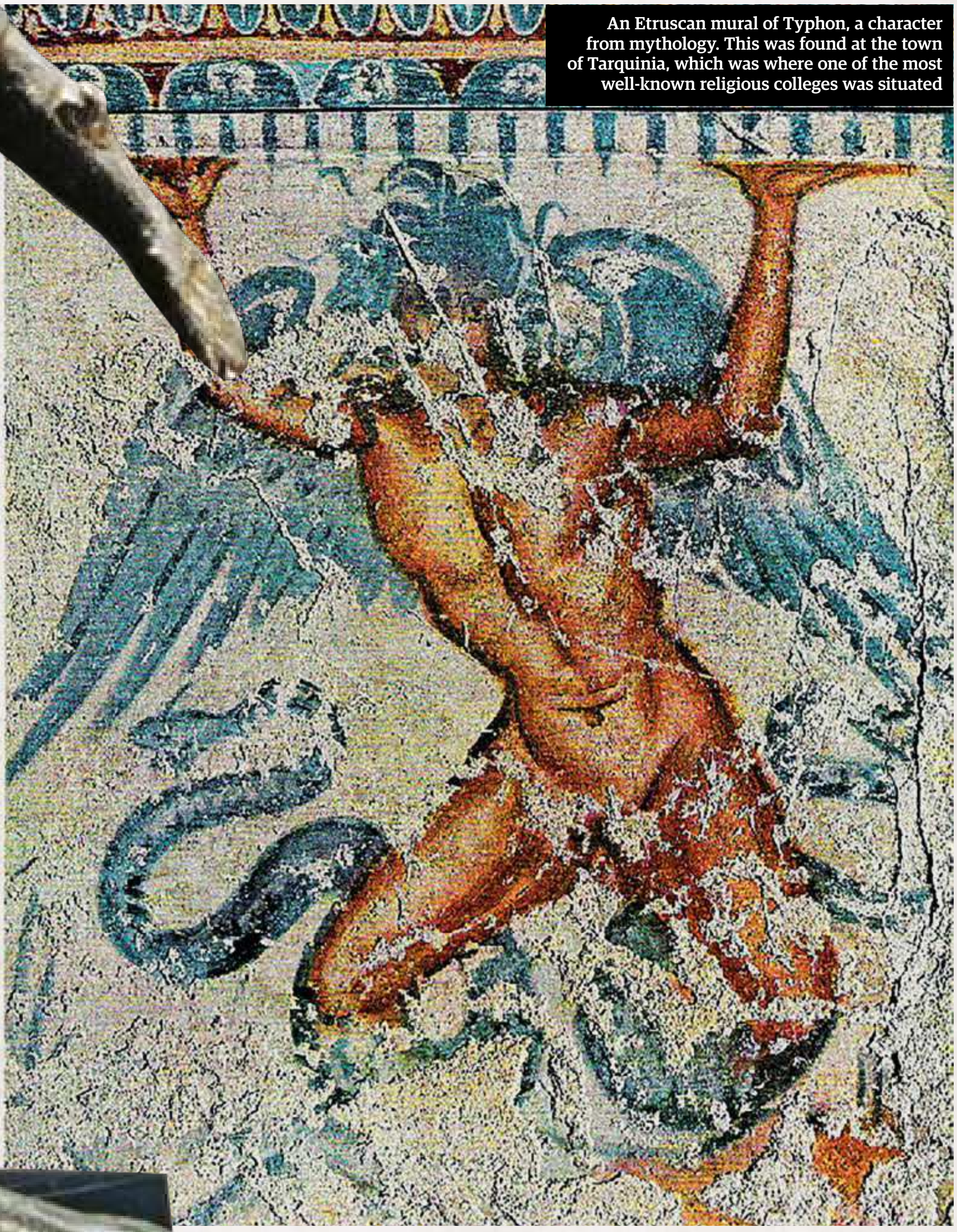
We know very little about worship within the cults of the Etruscan pantheon, but we have been able to explore other religious rites. Unlike the Greeks and the Romans, the Etruscans believed in fate, and that it could be changed only very little - the way to do that was through piety and worship. The Roman historian Livy went so far as to call the Etruscans “a nation devoted beyond all others to religious rites”, and to an extent he was possibly right; after all, religion is the part of Etruscan life that we know the most about, because there is surviving evidence.

Imagine Credit: Getty

Omens were incredibly important to discover what was coming and how it could potentially be avoided, and the understanding of them was split into two main categories: augury and haruspicy. The former involved reading omens from birds and lightning strikes, while the latter focused on examining the entrails of sacrificed animals. Both were used to determine future events and figure out why things were happening as well as how to minimise any bad impacts.

Thanks to the extensive training that priests went through, they knew which god had sent the lightning or flock of birds, why they had been sent, what was coming, and which sacrifices and rituals were needed to circumvent it. Divination played a large role in Etruscan religion, and this would go on to influence that of the Romans - much of their augury was based on it. While the Romans didn't like to credit the Etruscans - or most other cultures they assimilated aspects from - it is undeniable that their respect for omens came from their Italic forebears.

Etruscan priests, known as cepen, were trained at religious colleges around Etruria - the most famous of which was at Tarquinia - and they were almost all men, with the exception of a few women who may have had roles in some ceremonies. The priests became familiar with their sacred texts, known today as the *Etrusca disciplina*. While this has been lost to history - perhaps a deliberate attempt to stamp out paganism by some early Christians - we do know that it was comprised of three main sections, which detailed the reading of omens, the prediction of the future using animal entrails, and general rituals and rites that should be followed



An Etruscan mural of Typhon, a character from mythology. This was found at the town of Tarquinia, which was where one of the most well-known religious colleges was situated

Image Credit: Shizhao

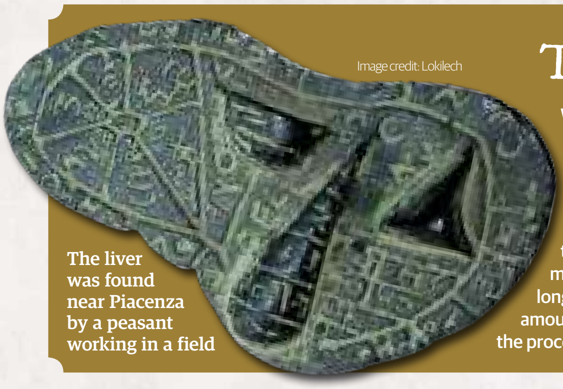


Image credit: Lokilech

The liver was found near Piacenza by a peasant working in a field

THE LIVER OF PIACENZA

Who could have thought that we'd learn so much from a piece of bronze? But that's exactly what has happened since the discovery of the Piacenza Liver in 1877. It's thanks to this small piece of metal, about 12 centimetres long, that we know a considerable amount about Etruscan religion and the process of divination.

A lot of inscriptions cover the surface of the bronze liver – in all, there are 40 names of gods, each with its own distinct section. When compared to the liver of a sacrificed animal, this would show which god had sent the omen. The liver was also split into two, with one side meaning that the omen was favourable, while a mark on the other side would mean the event coming would be decidedly less so. The positioning of each divinity's name also has a particular meaning, with some historians suggesting that the 16 names around the edge are there because the liver shows the 16 domains into which the heavens were split. However, it could also suggest a four-part division of space into north, south, east and west. Whatever the case, the Liver of Piacenza has been an important tool in decoding Etruscan divination, and no doubt it was of great help in training priests to interpret omens over 2,000 years ago as well.

Part of the architrave from the temple at Veii, one of the earliest stone religious buildings in Etruria

Image Credit: Rjdeadly

to appease the gods. It is also believed to have covered instructions for the founding of new settlements, procedures for placing city gates, temples and altars, and guidance for farmers. Legend has it that all of this information was provided by Tages, the grandson of Tinia, the head of the Etruscan pantheon, and a nymph by the name of Vegoia.

In depictions of Etruscan religious scenes, priests are usually shown as clean-shaven while trainees have beards, and it's also worth noting that religion was such an important facet of everyday life that many priests had important roles in government – the separation of 'church' and state was pretty much unheard of because of just how much the gods influenced mortals. While sacrifices were incredibly common – either burning the animal or offering its blood to the Underworld deities through the drain beside the altar – votive offerings were also made by everyone in society. These could be small terracotta figurines of animals or even body parts that needed healing, or bronze statuettes or vases. These were left at temples as well as other sacred spaces like rivers, springs, caves and mountains.

But the gods weren't just there for healing and making life better. Worshippers could bring harm to others through curse tablets, or by throwing a little figurine with its hands tied behind its back into a well. Like in the Greek and Roman pantheons, the Etruscan gods were chaotic and far from neutral.However, as so often in this time of history, things changed when the Romans invaded. The Etruscan gods were assimilated into the invaders' mythology or they vanished. By the 3rd century BCE, most of Etruria was under Roman control and that meant that they were now following the Roman way of life, including worshipping their gods.

Eventually, the Etruscans no longer existed – at least not with their native identity – but their religion was still a fascinating one, and the hope is that one day we'll know more about this unique society and bring it out from the shadow of its arguably more successful successor.

THE ETRUSCAN GODS

UNCOVER THE LITTLE-KNOWN ITALIC DEITIES WHO LOOKED AFTER THE PENINSULA BEFORE THE ROMANS CAME ALONG

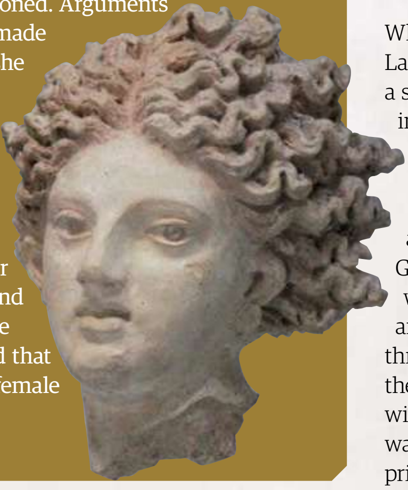
WRITTEN BY: KATHARINE MARSH

CATHA

Lunar or solar, Catha was an important Etruscan divinity

A daughter of the Sun, Catha was worshipped as a Sun goddess by the Etruscans, often in the same cult as Śuri at Pyrgi, an ancient Estrucan port in Latium, central Italy. However, as well as being associated with the Sun, Catha's influence also stretched into fertility, with her being invoked to protect young mothers and infant children, and to ensure hereditary succession. Furthermore, she has been credited with taking the spirits of the dead into the afterlife.

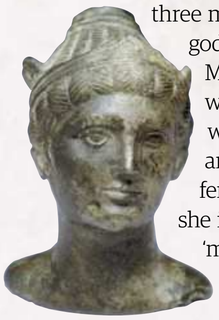
Apart from this, little is known about the goddess. It's hard to know what she really looked like to the Etruscans as very few images of her have been identified, and even her status as a solar divinity has been questioned. Arguments have been made that while she is called a daughter of the Sun, she could have actually been a lunar goddess - and some people have argued that she wasn't female at all.



TURAN

The Etruscans' answer to Aphrodite

Just the fact that the Etruscan equivalent of July (Traneus) was named after her shows Turan's importance in ancient Italy. The deity of love, peace and harmony was one of the three most important Etruscan goddesses alongside Uni and Menrva. Often depicted with wings, Turan also appears with birds like doves, geese and swans to represent fertility and motherhood, and she is sometimes referred to as 'mother', or 'ati', as a result. She also had a son, Turnu, and a younger lover, Atunis.



LARAN

A war god like his Greek counterpart

When it came to war, the Etruscans turned to Laran, their version of Ares and Mars. Possibly a son of Tinia, he was often represented in imagery and statues as heavily armed, usually with a lance and helmet, and donning a cape. He didn't appear in Etruscan writing until the first half of the 4th century BCE, and his tradition seems to follow that of Greek myth - he fights a giant, and appears with the goddess Turan almost as if the pair are Ares and Aphrodite. Together they had three young boys, all named Maris, but despite the similarity in name, they have nothing to do with the Roman Mars. No one is sure how he was worshipped, but we do know that it was privately, and that his cult spread outside Italy

USIL

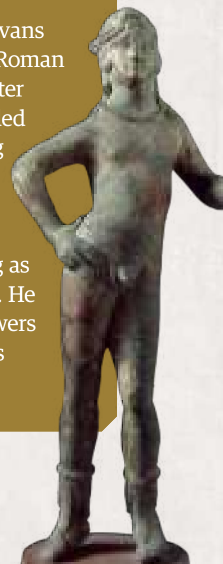
A Sun deity whose face got around

Often depicted rising out of the sea, Usil was a Sun god, the equivalent of the Greek Helios or Roman Sol. Over time he also took on the features of solar Apollo, and he became a popular figure in Etruscan art, his image, often complete with a halo of sunbeams or riding a four-horse chariot, on everything from mirrors to roof decorations. Usil appeared on fittings on funeral carts and chariots for the Etruscan elite. His wings showed that he was able to carry the body across the sky.

SELVANS

A liminal god of woods and boundaries

A god of boundaries and limits, Selvans was different in appearance to his Roman counterpart, Silvanus; while the latter was usually shown as an old, bearded man, the Etruscan deity was young and clean-shaven. Frequently mentioned in inscriptions and on votive offerings, Selvans was a popular god in Etruria, also serving as the deity of forests and boundaries. He was also thought to have some powers in the underworld, although little is known about this today.



MENRVA

Before Minerva, there was Menrva

One of Etruria's most important goddesses, Menrva was a deity of two halves. On the one hand, she was seen as a divinity of war, often being depicted in a helmet, breastplate and military cloak with a spear raised to attack. On the other hand, she was associated with health and healing, with votive offerings of a terracotta body parts found at her sanctuaries suggesting that her followers believed she would heal them.

Menrva was well known across the Etruscan world, and she had important sanctuaries at Veii (modern Portonaccio) and Lavinium (Pratica di Mare today). A powerful weather god, she was even known to the Romans as one of the nine Etruscan deities who could control lightning, and she is represented with a lightning bolt.

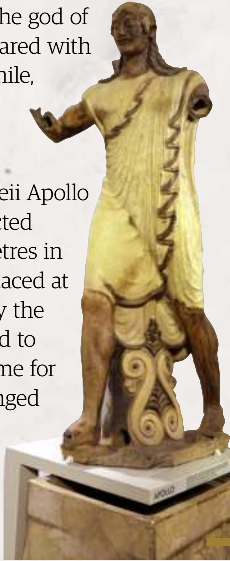
UNI

The goddess who stood above all others

The role of supreme goddess of the Estruscan pantheon fell to Uni, wife of Tinia and mother of Menrva, both of whom she shared a triad with. Thanks to this position, she was often viewed as a mother figure by the people of northern Etruria, and she was also worshipped as a goddess of marriage, fertility and childbirth. Having said that, there was another side to Uni – she was sometimes depicted with weapons, although instead of armour she donned the skin of a horned goat. She was also known for fighting with Hercle, the Etruscan version of Heracles or Hercules, although this disagreement was eventually calmed down by her husband. The reconciliation saw Uni nurse Hercle, which in some Etruscan traditions turned him into an immortal being. Her imagery is very close to Greek Hera.

APULU

A Greek god in Italy



Apulu, later Aplu, was undeniably Greek – he was a foreign god who was assimilated into the Etruscan pantheon with very few changes. In Etruscan tradition he remained the god of the oracle of Delphi, which he shared with Dionysus – or his Etruscan facsimile, Fufluns – and he was often depicted as typically Greek with a bow, lyre and laurel. The most famous depiction of him is the Veii Apollo terracotta statue, which, constructed around 510 BCE, stands at 1.8 metres in height and was designed to be placed at the highest part of a temple. Only the vowels in his name were changed to fit into Etruscan; this was the same for his twin sister, whose name changed from Artemis to Artumes. His foreign character strengthened his authority in Etruria, and he soon found himself with a cult following.

TINIA

A law-making leader with lightning

The head of the Etruscan pantheon was Tinia. Known for his concern for harmony between the gods, he often used his lightning bolt as a sign of a decision or judgement, therefore becoming known as a peacemaker. While the lightning bolt was attributed to him, it was also used by other Etruscan gods.

Tinia was a god of boundaries, and he was known for administering justice within the cosmos that he helped to organise. He took responsibility for looking over the use of land, causing whirlwinds, hail, rain and

HERCLE

This hero was a god to the Etruscans

There is some similarity between the Etruscan Hercle and the Greco-Roman Heracles and Hercules, but there is one major difference: in Etruria, Hercle was always a god. The tradition of him being a mortal-turned-immortal didn't carry over to Hercle, with the Etruscan version of him instead being born a deity. Sanctuaries and oracles were dedicated to him across Etruria and Latium, and he enjoyed his own cult worship.

As with most of the Etruscan gods, we don't know the details of how he was worshipped, but it's thought that Hercle had something to do with water. We also know that many soldiers invoked him as a warrior god, and some statues and monuments showing his adventures and labours date back to the end of the 7th century BCE. His labours were known all over Etruria, and they took on symbolic meanings that were then manipulated by political leaders and tyrants throughout the centuries.

TURMS

Messenger and mediator of the gods

The equivalent of Hermes and Mercury, Turms was a mainstay in Etruscan mythology. He played the important role of mediator between gods and humans as well as between the mortal world and the underworld. He was also known for leading dead mortals to the afterlife. He was sometimes depicted with wings on his shoulders, but he was always recognisable with a beardless face, traveller's hat and his caduceus, or staff. He was often used to decorate everyday objects like mirrors, and he also appeared on some Etruscan coins, although his role in ferrying souls to the underworld did earn him a place on some Etruscan sarcophagi alongside other funereal figures like Charun and Cerberus.

CHARUN

An underworld deity unlike many others

This demon of death wasn't to be trifled with. Often depicted carrying a hammer that he certainly wasn't afraid to use, Charun's role was to guard the gates to the underworld. Sometimes portrayed as having animal ears, an eagle's beak, green skin and wings, he was nothing short of a menacing and quite frankly ugly sight. His name came from Charon, the old man who would ferry the souls of the Greeks across the River Styx and into the Greek underworld. But sometimes Charun did good – while he usually shown holding his hammer in an aggressive way to those souls coming towards him, he has also been seen using it to kill serpents or other creatures blocking the path to the afterlife, protecting travellers.

ANCIENT ROMAN RELIGION

THE ROMANS RULED AN EMPIRE BUT WERE RULED BY A PANTHEON OF GODS WHO CONTROLLED EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR LIVES

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

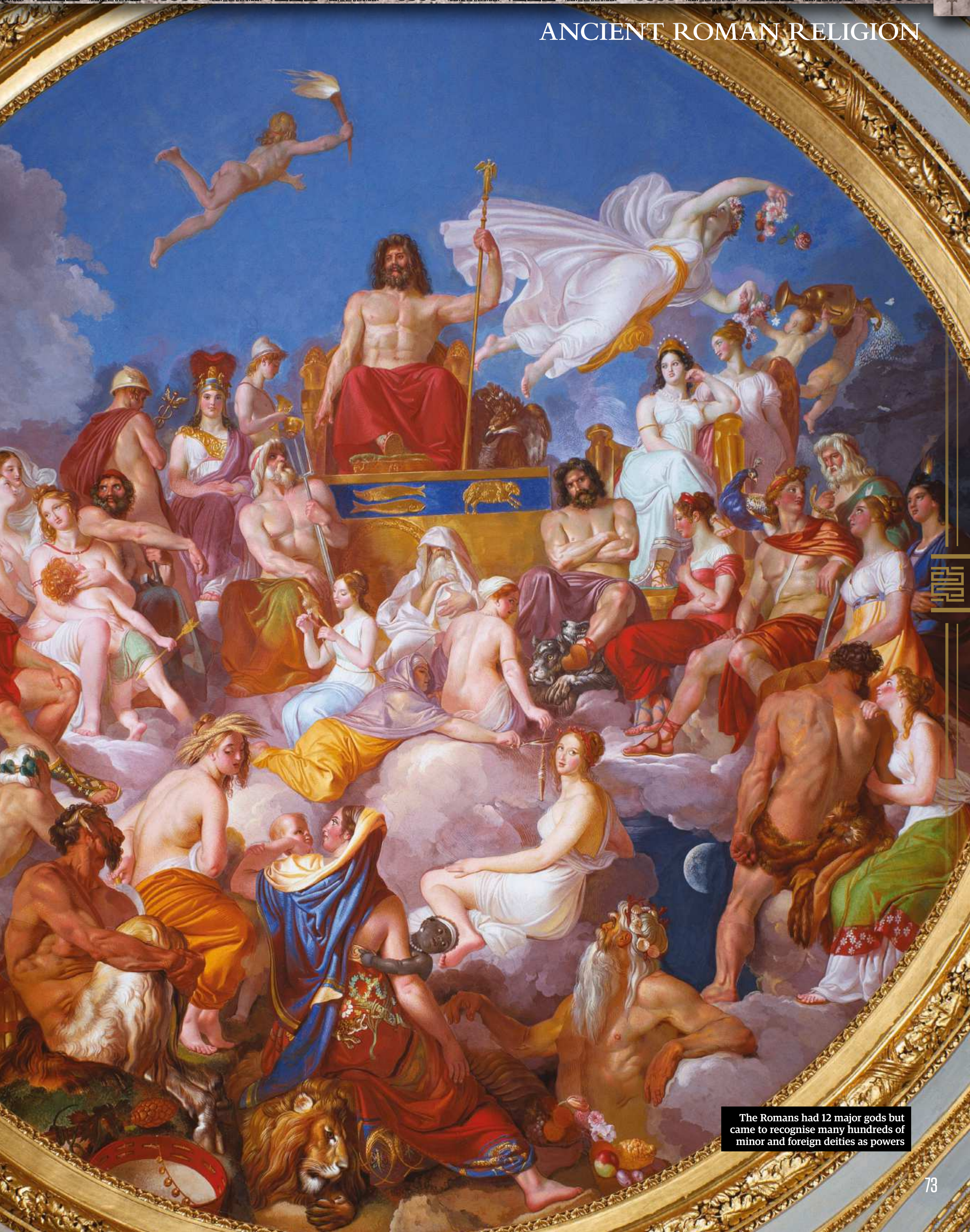
The Roman mind was an odd one; hard-nosed pragmatism was meshed with deeply held superstition. While the legions of the Empire marched across the world people felt that the might of Rome was supported not so much by their fearsome military prowess but by the goodwill of the gods. It is impossible to understand Rome without knowledge of their pre-Christian faith.

The foundational myth of Rome shows the importance they placed on divine signs. When Romulus and Remus wanted to found a city they marked out the sky and waited for the gods to send them a message. Remus saw six eagles, but Romulus saw a full dozen and that is why we study 'Roman' paganism and not 'Reman'. The ancient gods worshipped by the Romans were all clearly and closely related to the deities of the Greek world. Zeus the Father (Zeus Pater) of the Greeks morphed into Jupiter of the Romans while maintaining his role as king of heaven. There is some evidence that both Zeus and Jupiter developed from earlier Proto-Indo-European gods but others were absorbed into the pantheon within historical memory.

Italy was once home to many colonies sent out by Greek city-states. These held on to the gods of the cities that had founded them. As Rome expanded its influence by conquest, these cities entered into the Roman world and their gods became the gods of Rome. Diana, Minerva, Venus, and Hercules are all thought to have become Roman gods in this way.

Before these additions had been made, Roman paganism was influenced by that of the Etruscans. The Etruscans pre-dated Rome and controlled a large area of land bordering Rome in the 9-6th centuries BCE. By the time Rome absorbed the final Etruscan cities it had long before taken up many of their religious practices. The Etruscans studied nature for signs of the gods' instructions. Haruspices were priests who used the entrails of sacrificial animals to read the will of heaven. The practically minded Romans would continue to use this method to predict auguries of the future for centuries to come.

Roman paganism in its purest form of around 100 BCE was already therefore a religion of borrowings. While there were proud noble families



The Romans had 12 major gods but came to recognise many hundreds of minor and foreign deities as powers who looked down on 'foreign' faiths even the haughtiest would have had to admit that gods had long been imported to the city. In 217 BCE Italy was being ravaged by Hannibal and his army. Against the warnings of priests the Romans met Hannibal in battle at Lake Trasimene and they suffered one of the worst defeats in history. Clearly the gods had not been on the side of Rome. Consulting the sacred *Sibylline Texts* it was decided that Rome would have to bring Venus of Eryx, a city on Sicily, to Rome. The Romans offered this goddess a huge bribe and a temple in the heart of Rome if only she would relocate. The image of the goddess was transferred to Rome and the worship of Venus Erycina inaugurated. Rome went on to defeat Hannibal.

MITHRAS

At sites across the Roman Empire strange monuments have been found underground. In domed caves, statues depict a young man in the act of slaying a bull. Known as the Tauroctony these sculptures are the remains of the cult of a god known as Mithras.

Mithraism was just one of many 'mystery cults' that flourished during the Roman Empire. These cults were often foreign imports that offered followers access to secrets hidden from outsiders. Some promised to reveal the secrets of the afterlife. We know very little of what the followers of Mithras believed but some clues are found in his temples.

Mithras is sometimes shown as being born from a rock, dining with the god Sol, or with a lion-headed figure surrounded by snakes. The central image of the temple is always the bull slaying, but nothing is known of the meaning of the act. We do know that Mithras worshippers called themselves 'syndexioi' – those who shake hands. Perhaps the secret of Mithras was in the bonds formed between followers. The cult was popular among soldiers and persisted until the 4th century CE when it was suppressed as a rival faith to Christianity.

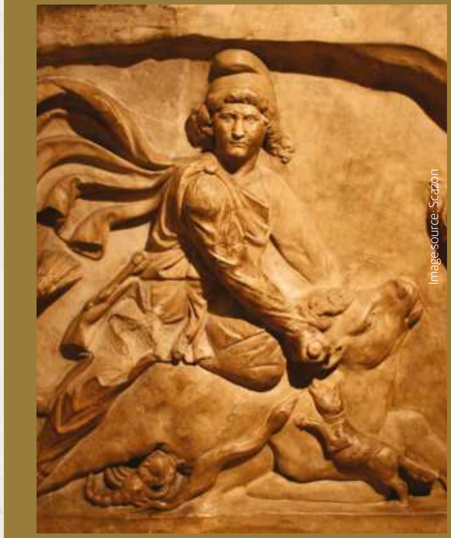


Image source: Scazon

The tauroctony (bull slaying) was the focus of worship in Mithraism and echoed the tradition of animal sacrifice found in mainstream Roman paganism

Prayer for a Roman was not a quiet act of contemplation allowing communion between the worshipper and the worshipped. Roman religion was performative. Worship was loud, colourful, and smelly. A Roman temple was the scene of chanting, gaudily painted images of the gods, and the bloody sacrifice of animals. For the gods to be propitiated they had to be seen to be offered something good.

There is some evidence that human sacrifice may once have played a role in Roman paganism. In one legend, after an earthquake opened a chasm in the forum of Rome it was feared that the gods were displeased. The city was told to offer its most precious item to the pit to placate the gods. Marcus Curtius put on his battle armour, mounted his horse, and leapt into the hole, declaring that bravery was the most valuable possession of the Romans. The chasm closed over him and Rome was saved. Some believe that gladiatorial battles were originally funerary rites with the dead fighters as offerings to the deceased.

If humans were once offered to the gods, by the time of the Roman Empire it was animals that took up the burden of placating them. Sheep, pigs, and cows were often slaughtered. The victim was supposed to be willingly killed so attempts were made to keep it calm before a priest stunned it with a hammer and slit its throat. After the sacrifice feasts were held at which the gods, in the form of their sacred images, would have been present. A portion of the sacrificial beast was burned so that the gods could enjoy their offering through the smoke while their followers feasted.

Sacrifices could be small affairs to bless a family or huge offerings to save the city. In order to survive in the war against Hannibal the city offered Jupiter every single animal born that spring. For those unable to afford a bull it was also appropriate to give the gods a drink of wine, bunch of grapes, or honey cake. Not all the services of the gods were large enough to require a whole ceremony.

In a polytheist pantheon there is always room for another deity. Within a Roman home there would be a small shrine to those gods which were specially honoured within the household. The Lares Familiares and Di Penates were gods with a special role within the household. The Di Penates took care of the family who owned the

"PRAYER FOR A ROMAN WAS NOT A QUIET ACT OF CONTEMPLATION"

Image source: Getty

home. Every time the family dined a small portion would be offered to a fire to include the Penate in the meal. The Lares Familiares were responsible not only for the family but for everyone, including slaves, who lived within the house.

Some found the profusion of deities bemusing. Saint Augustine, a hostile witness on Roman paganism, mocked the littleness of some Roman gods. He records how Cardea watched hinges, Forculus guarded doors, and Limentinus was responsible for thresholds. Augustine wondered how it could be that one human guard was enough to watch a doorway when three gods were required. In more vital areas like the harvesting of corn he lists ten gods who have a role in the various stages of the crop's development and growth.

Paganism's ability to add new gods offered Roman emperors a unique political opportunity. Romans were used to worshipping figures that had once been mortal. Romulus himself is said to have mysteriously disappeared into heaven. It was even accepted that some people had divine ancestry. Aeneas, founder of Rome, was the son of Venus and through him Julius Caesar was able to claim to the descendent of a goddess. Caesar was honoured by some as a living god and a house built for him at the Republic's expense was shaped like a temple. Statues were set up to Caesar as a divinity. Unfortunately Julius' flesh was not as impervious to daggers as his statues.

When Caesar was murdered he was officially declared a god. This allowed his adopted son Augustus to call himself Divi Filius - Son of God. Augustus itself was a name he chose for its religious associations. He allowed citizens outside of Italy to build temples in his honour but, perhaps remembering the fate of his uncle, forbade it at Rome. When sailors from Alexandria offered him divine honours he was pleased. They claimed it was through him that they were able to sail the seas in peace, trade, and had liberty. This is the practical Roman definition of a deity - a being able to render aid to worshippers. Augustus was therefore a god worth worshipping. On his death a senator saw an eagle rise from the funeral pyre and so it was decided Augustus would be honoured in Rome too. Many of his successors as emperor followed him into the sky as they died. The Emperor Vespasian even mocked the Imperial Cult on his deathbed. "Alas," he said, "I fear I am becoming a god."

The fall of paganism in Rome was tied to the Imperial family. Constantine was the first emperor to make Christianity legal in the empire and over time pagan symbols, including the statue of Victory in the Senate house were removed. The Emperor Julian (known by Christians as Julian the Apostate) was the last pagan emperor, coming to the purple after the rise of Christianity, but despite his efforts to restore the worship of Rome's older gods alongside the newer faiths, his short reign was unable to bring back religious toleration. After his death in battle, supposedly saying "You have won, Galilean," the Roman world became ever more, and finally exclusively Christian.

Animals were messengers between humans and the divine and feature in heavily in Roman myth, like the wolf that fed Romulus and Remus

SENATVS POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS
MONVMENTA MARMOREA MAGISTRATVVM

Image source: Enrique Íñiguez Rodríguez

ROME'S BIG TWELVE

Meet the gods and goddesses worshipped, revered and feared by the ancient Romans

Written by: Katharine Marsh

JUNO

MORE THAN JUST JUPITER'S WIFE

If you were a woman in ancient Rome, especially a married one, Juno was your goddess as she kept an eye over all aspects of women's lives. She even enjoyed her own festival, the Matronalia, on 1 March each year during which husbands gave gifts to their wives during a time of renewal and the reawakening of nature. In one of her many guises, Juno was also tasked with overseeing childbirth as Juno Lucina, and a temple was dedicated to this version of her on the Esquiline Hill. Juno has the privilege of being one of the oldest Roman gods as one of the three originals – the Capitoline Triad – alongside her brother and husband Jupiter, and Minerva, all three of whom were adopted into the Roman pantheon from the Etruscans. As the centuries went by, her status grew ever larger and her cult expanded until she was recognised as the principal female divinity of the state, rightfully sitting alongside Jupiter.

VENUS

LOVE AND MOTHERHOOD FELL UNDER THE DOMAIN OF CUPID'S MOTHER

When Saturn castrated his father and his blood fell into the sea, a new goddess rose from the sea foam: Venus. As she was the deity in charge of love, sex, beauty, fertility and prostitution, it seems like a somewhat ironic birth. Venus didn't discriminate when it came to sexual partners - she would take both mortals and immortals as lovers. In the former category fell Vulcan and Mars, and she had many divine children with the latter including the Cupids. Her mortal lovers were Anchises, Adonis and the Sicilian king Butes. The first temple we know about that was dedicated to Venus was on the Aventine Hill in 295 BCE, and her reputation only grew with temples dedicated to Venus the Mother and the Changer of Hearts appearing over time. The Romans didn't skimp on their festivals in her honour either, with Veneralia and Vinalia Urbana both being held in April, followed by Vinalia Rustica in August and Venus Genetrix in September.

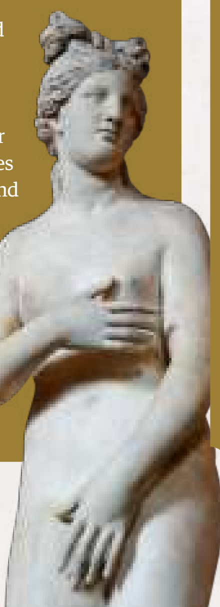


Image Source: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg)

JUPITER

THE ONE WHO REIGNED SUPREME

Above the multitude of other gods and goddesses in the ancient Roman pantheon sat the mighty Jupiter. With his grand throne and eagle-topped sceptre, he was the man in charge, the deity who watched over every single Roman citizen. Jupiter's domain was the sky and everything that went with it, blowing the clouds away on an overcast day or smiting those who wronged him with crashing thunderbolts. His grandest temple sat on the Capitoline Hill and was dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus - the best and greatest. It was here that generals and emperors would parade to during their triumphs to display their spoils from their campaigns. While he was a regal being, he was also known for his sexual transgressions, despite his marriage to his sister Juno. He managed to find his way into the beds of many a mortal woman, often fathering children like Hercules, Mercury, Bacchus and more.

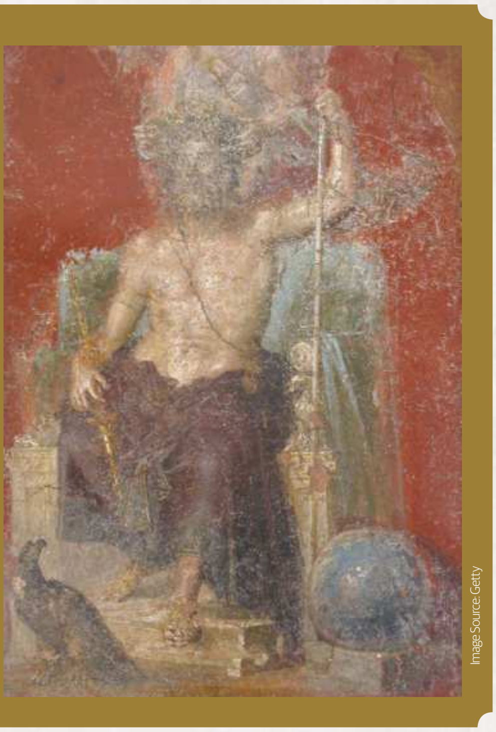


Image Source: Getty

MINERVA

WAR WASN'T JUST A MAN'S GAME

One of the Capitoline Triad, Minerva was the goddess of many aspects of Roman life: wisdom, medicine, commerce, poetry, the arts, handicrafts and war. However, that last facet of her divinity was one that appeared over time, causing her to encroach upon Mars' domain ever more frequently. In fact, she eventually took over the Quinquatrus festival, a five-day celebration that signalled the start of the army's campaign season, from her half-brother. As well as war, Minerva would build a reputation throughout the Roman Republic as a deity of victory, and Pompey dedicated a temple to her after his successful campaigns in the east. Minerva boasted a shrine on Rome's Aventine Hill, built in 263 or 262 BCE, which became a meeting place for guilds of craftsmen in the city. There was also another shrine dedicated to her on the Caelian Hill, and a temple was built in her name in the Nerva Forum by the emperor Domitian, who claimed that the goddess was protecting him.

NEPTUNE

A FISHERMAN'S FRIEND, THIS GOD WATCHED OVER THE SEAS

In the ancient Mediterranean, the sea provided the fastest mode of transport – making sacrifices to its deity was of utmost importance. For the Romans, this happened to be Neptune, brother of Jupiter and Pluto. Originally known as the god of freshwater rivers, lakes and streams, after the adoption of the Greek pantheon in the 4th-3rd centuries BCE he became inextricably intertwined with his Grecian counterpart, Poseidon. He took on the three-pronged trident and often appeared with the dolphins that had been associated with Poseidon.

Neptune also enjoyed his own festival each summer, Neptunalia, which was marked with games. However, not much else is known about the event. The god was also worshipped across Rome's vast territories. Married to a sea nymph by the name of Amphitrite, Neptune had a son, Triton, who was half man, half fish. He was also the father of Pegasus, the infamous winged horse.

MARS

THE PROTECTOR AND WARRIOR WHO LOOKED AFTER ROME

In a civilisation built through battle and conquest, a god of war was always going to sit high in the pantheon - Mars was second only to Jupiter. Often modelled on his Greek counterpart, Ares, Mars did have some more Roman attributes that separated him from the Greek god; namely that he was more levelheaded, and more virtuous. Considered by some to be the father of the twins Romulus and Remus, Mars was often looked at as the protector of Rome and the Roman way of life, defending the Eternal City's borders and keeping the enemy at bay. Festivals in his honour were held in March, which was named 'Martius' after him, and October, two months that bookended the Roman military season. March would see Equirria, which ensured that horses would be well when on campaign, along with Feriae Marti, Agonium Martiale and Tubilustrium. October played host to the Armilustrium festival on the Aventine, which saw weapons be purified before they were stored away for the winter.

DIANA

IF YOU GO OUT TO THE WOODS, YOU'RE PROBABLY PRAYING TO DIANA

There's a chance that she was an Italic woodland deity before the influence of the Greek pantheon, but the Roman Diana became inextricably linked with Artemis fairly early on. Her domain focused on animals, both wild and domestic, and the hunt, but she was also a fertility goddess who was invoked to aid conception and birth. Diana was also considered a protector of Rome's lower classes and slaves, with her festival day – 13 August, the Ides of the month – being a holiday for the latter. Today, the most famous place of worship associated with Diana is the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the Wood, on the shores of Lake Nemi about an hour outside of Rome. She also had her own temple on the Aventine in the city, which was home to the foundation charter of the Latin League that apparently dated back to the 6th century BCE.

MERCURY

THE WINGED MESSENGER GOD

In 495 BCE, a new god came to Rome. Mercury was the deity of shopkeepers, travellers, transporters of goods, thieves and tricksters, and his brand new temple on the Aventine Hill was open for business. He shared it with his mother, Maia, who also featured in his festival, Mercuralia, every 15 May, the supposed anniversary of the temple's dedication. When it came to depicting Mercury, many drew their inspiration from his Greek equivalent, Hermes, giving him winged sandals or a winged cap. Others gave him a bag in which to carry the goods he was transporting, or a type of wand that was used to reconcile conflicts.

Mercury crops up quite a lot in ancient stories – in Virgil's *Aeneid*, it is he who reminded Aeneas that he needed to leave Dido to found Rome, and he also makes a few appearances in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, making visits to mortals as he liked to do.

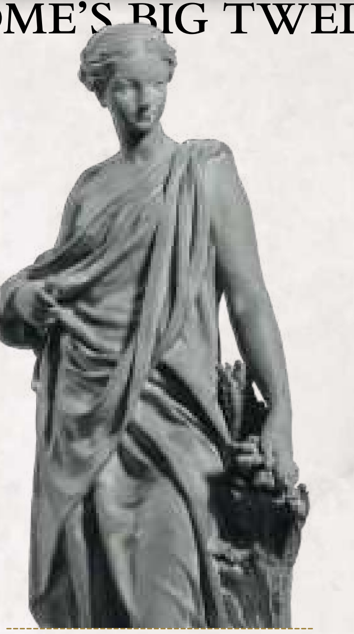


Image Source: Augustin Pajou

CERES

WHEN COLLECTING THE HARVEST, MAKE SURE TO SEND UP A PRAYER TO THIS GODDESS

While most gods only came to help mortals if they deemed them special or worthy, Ceres showed no favouritism. Every day, the goddess of agriculture and grain would nurture mankind, and she taught humans how to grow, preserve and prepare grain and corn. She was kind and benevolent, ready to help anyone who asked, unlike her brother, Jupiter, and an idiom was born from this - 'fit for Ceres' meant that something was brilliant or splendid.

Boasting a temple on the Aventine Hill in Rome, Ceres also had a festival, the Cerealia, held on 19 April each year. However, this temple, built around 496 BCE, suffered extensive fire damage in 31 BCE. Knowing its importance, the emperor Augustus made sure that it was rebuilt. It became a religious and political centre among the lower classes, and even became known for the splendour of the works of art displayed there.

VESTA

A GODDESS RESERVED FOR WOMEN

A round temple sat in the forum in the centre of Rome, and it contained a fire. If this flame should ever go out, it would mean disaster for Rome, so it was left under the care of the followers of Vesta. She was the goddess of the hearth fire - and the patron deity of bakers - so the connection is clear. Vesta's festival, Vestalia, was held every year on 7-15 June, and it was only at this time that women could enter the innermost sanctuary of her temples.

Usually depicted as a woman draped head to toe in fabric and often with her trusty ass by her side, Vesta found her way into the homes of ordinary Romans, often appearing on household shrines alongside the Penates and Lares.

Being one of the Vestal Virgins - a priestess in her cult - would also grant women privileges like a front row seat at the theatre instead of being relegated to the back of the audience.

VULCAN

DON'T STAND TOO NEAR A VOLCANO IF THIS GOD GETS ANGRY

Vulcan wasn't known for being a looker – in fact, he'd been so unattractive when he cried as a baby that his mother, Juno, had thrown him from the heavens. The fall left him with a limp for the rest of his life. However, this worked out pretty well for him in the long run – it was how he eventually met Venus, ironically the goddess of beauty, who then became his bride, although their relationship wasn't exactly smooth-sailing; the legend goes that whenever Venus had an affair, Vulcan's anger would cause a volcano to erupt. The god of fire, Vulcan's festival day was 23 August, which saw the Vulcanalia celebration. He was also the blacksmith of the gods, and because of his power over destructive fire, his temples were usually located outside of cities, just in case.

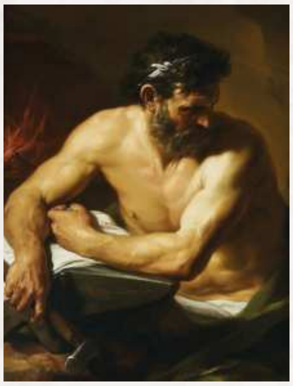


Image Source: Pompeo Batoni

APOLLO

A GREEK DEITY TURNED ROMAN

Sometimes Roman gods were pretty much carbon copies of their Greek counterparts, and Apollo certainly fell into that category. The deity of the Sun, healing and prophecy, among others, was a son of Jupiter and the twin brother of Diana, and the first temple dedicated to him in Rome was built near the Theatre of Marcellus in the 5th century BCE for Apollo Medicus, or Apollo the Healer, as the city was ravaged by plague. Apollo did enjoy one thing that most other gods didn't - he had an oracle at Delphi. People from all around the Mediterranean came to seek the deity's advice through his mouthpiece, the Pythia, and this continued from the Greek era through to the Romans as control passed to them in 191 BCE. The sanctuary remained through the Roman Empire with games being held there until Christianity began to take over. In 393 CE, Emperor Theodosius demanded that all pagan sanctuaries be closed, and Delphi's importance faded away along with the Roman gods.

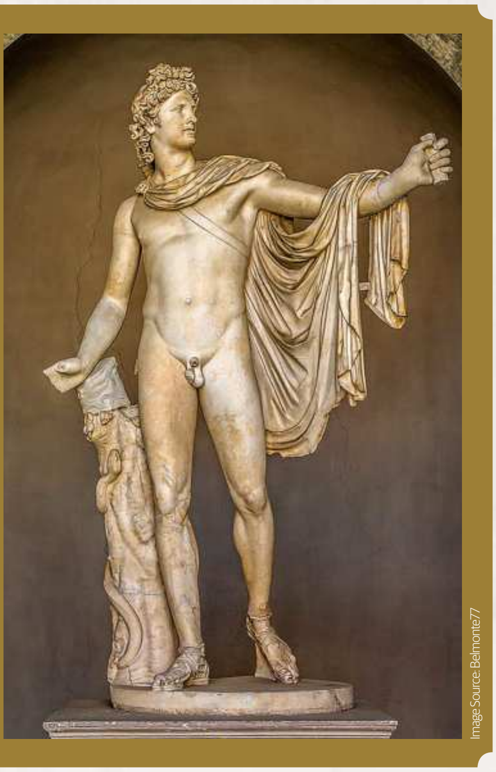


Image Source: Belmonte77

RELIGION OF THE CELTS

CELTIC PAGANISM SPANNED A THOUSAND YEARS AND THE ENTIRE EUROPEAN CONTINENT, YET IS LITTLE KNOWN TODAY. WHO WERE THE MYSTERIOUS WORSHIPPERS IN THOSE DARK FORESTS?

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

The forests, hills, and plains of Europe were terrifying for the ancient Greeks and Romans. The primordial gloom of woods where no civilised person set foot was the location of human sacrifice and dark rites. The north, east, and west of the continent was the home of barbarians, and these people they called the Celts.

While the classical world tended to think of them as a single society, the reality was a patchwork of tribes and peoples. The Celts may have shared much linguistically and culturally but they were never one nation. From Spain to Bulgaria, the wilds of Scotland to the Mediterranean, and over a thousand years many local differences in their religion evolved. Celtic paganism is a difficult faith to firmly grasp.

Relying on hostile sources such as Caesar obviously requires care. In his work Caesar did not give the gods of the Gauls their native names but referred to them by their Roman counterparts, claiming the main deity of the Gauls was Mercury. The Gaulish Celts apparently had many images of their gods, but the archaeological evidence for this is scant. It may be that the Celts of Gaul used wooden statues of their gods and that these have not survived. Some scholars dispute this and believe that the Celtic tribes mostly worshipped in nature and their gods were not personified in human form.

In the evidence we have of Celts, from Britain all the way to modern Turkey, we find mention of hundreds of deities by name, many mentioned only once. It may be that these gods were very local and specific to a tribe. The goddess Sequana had power over the river Seine, and Celts hundreds of miles away would have no need of her aid. It may also be that many names may refer to one god known by different epithets in different places. It is also true that many gods were worshipped across wide areas.

Many place-names throughout Europe make reference to a god known as Lugus. Lyon in France, Lothian in Scotland, and Legnica in Poland are all named in his honour. The god Lugh of the Irish Celts, again related to Lugus, displayed many of the attributes Caesar described the Celtic 'Mercury' having. He was a god of skills, arts, and good kingship. Votive inscriptions and descriptions in

The Celtic world was full of deities, monsters, and heroes. The Gundestrup Cauldron shows many scenes of Celtic myth

INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIANITY

Celtic paganism was absorbed into Roman religion in many areas, but in the relatively un-Romanised Ireland it was Christianity that submerged it. Medieval Irish texts that preserved Celtic tales were sometimes glossed by the scribes who copied them to suggest that paganism prefigured the coming of Christianity. The replacement of Celtic polytheism was not total though and some aspects ended up within Irish Christianity. The Horned God Cernunnos appears to have influenced the image of St Ciaran who is said to have lived in the forest and whose first followers were animals. This syncretism may have smoothed the adoption of Christianity for the Irish Celts.

St Brigid is one of the most important saints of Ireland, yet there are some scholars who doubt her historical existence because St Brigid shares her name with a Celtic goddess. It seems that this goddess was simply adopted into Christianity as a saint. The goddess was a nurturing one, and similar imagery and miracles are given to both. Both are associated with holy wells in Kildare and sacred flames guarded by attendants were used in the worship of both.

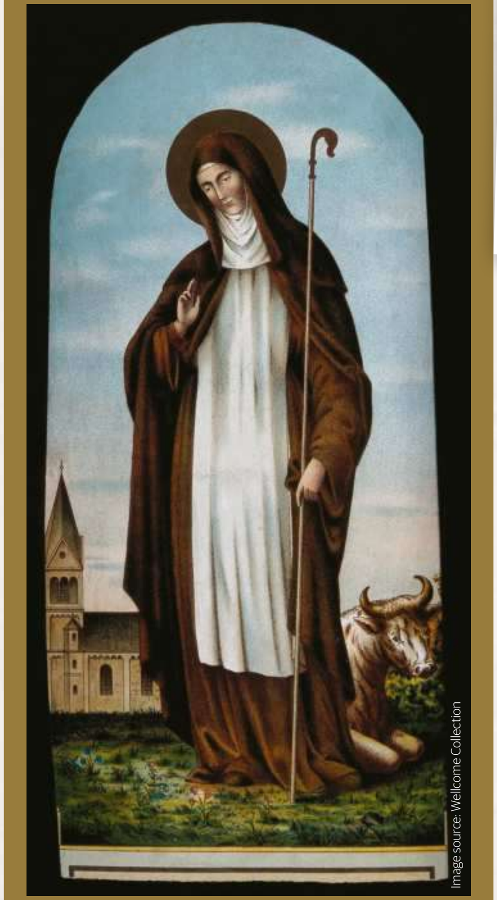


Image source: Wellcome Collection

Despite the obvious Christian imagery surrounding depictions of St Brigid many think she was once a pagan deity

> “THE NUMBER OF DEITIES WITH POWER AND LETHAL PROWESS IN BATTLE IS EXTENSIVE”

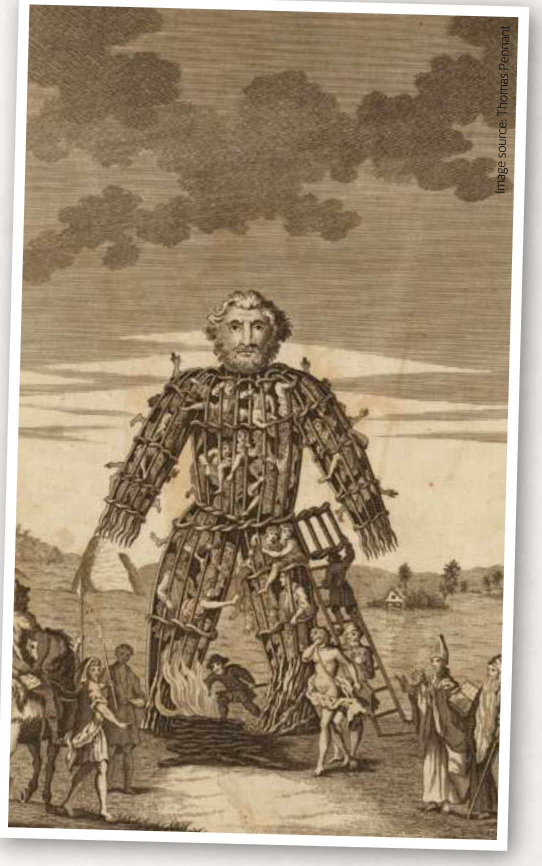


Image source: Thomas Pennant

Irish and Welsh poetry paint Lugus as a brave and ideal sovereign.

Other gods from across the Celtic tribes may lack the same name but can be placed into categories that clearly crossed tribal boundaries. Mother-goddesses, called Matres, have been found throughout north-western Europe. Mostly shown on altars and statues as a group of three, these goddesses were popular Celtic deities that were associated with sacrifice but also with bounty too. One of the goddesses is always depicted with a richly overflowing basket of fruit and vegetables.

> In Ireland, Celtic paganism had a profound effect on Christianity, with pagan deities reinterpreted as Christian saints

War must have been a major aspect of life in the Celtic tribes. The number of deities with power and lethal prowess in battle is extensive. For the Celts it seems that war itself was embodied by a goddess. In southern Gaul a warrior might invoke Andarta but when Boudicca rode down the Romans in Britain she called out for aid from Andraste. In Ireland the Morrigan was a triple goddess who personified the havoc of battle, the skill of arms, and the playing out of fate in warfare. It is impossible though to know if Celts from different areas would have accepted these variously named deities as the same goddess.

Perhaps the most striking Celtic deity was the Horned God. Images and statues from across Europe have been found of a man crowned by a pair of antlers. His widespread depiction suggests he developed early in the Celtic period and was important in the pagan pantheon. Often called Cernunnos, the god is sometimes surrounded by animals, especially deer. His partially animal form may suggest a strong link with nature. From what we know of Celtic pagan practices, nature was of paramount importance.

Much of what we know about the ancient Celts comes from outside sources. In particular the Celts themselves never wrote down their religious beliefs. Caesar in his *Conquest of Gaul* mentions that this was to stop the spread of the doctrines outside their priestly class, the druids, and to preserve the skills of those who memorised the lore of the Celts. People who write things down, it was thought, tend to forget those things. Unfortunately what those things they wanted remembered were have been forgotten.

Druidic training in the Celtic religion could last for 20 years and they were leaders in society as well as in religion. Druids acted a repositories of history, lore, medicine, and law. Called on to advise kings they could also pass legal sentences. Yet their most important role was in acting as intermediaries between the Celts of Gaul, Britain, and Ireland, and the gods. One druid, named Diviciacus, impressed the Roman statesman Cicero with his ability to predict the future through augury.

Druids have left no material presence in the archaeological record. It seems that they performed their rituals in groves in forests. Pliny the Elder describes white robed druids climbing oak trees to harvest mistletoe with a golden sickle. The mistletoe was used to cure all manner of ailments as long as it did not touch the ground. The knowledge of botany and medicine was inseparable from druidic religion and theology.

Though individual Druids may have pleased the Romans and impressed the Greeks with their knowledge of natural philosophy, as a class they were seen as a threat, especially by Roman invaders. The druids taught the theory of transmigration of souls, a form of reincarnation, and this was thought to make Celts fight more fearlessly, as they were not afraid of dying in battle. The idea of human sacrifice may also have

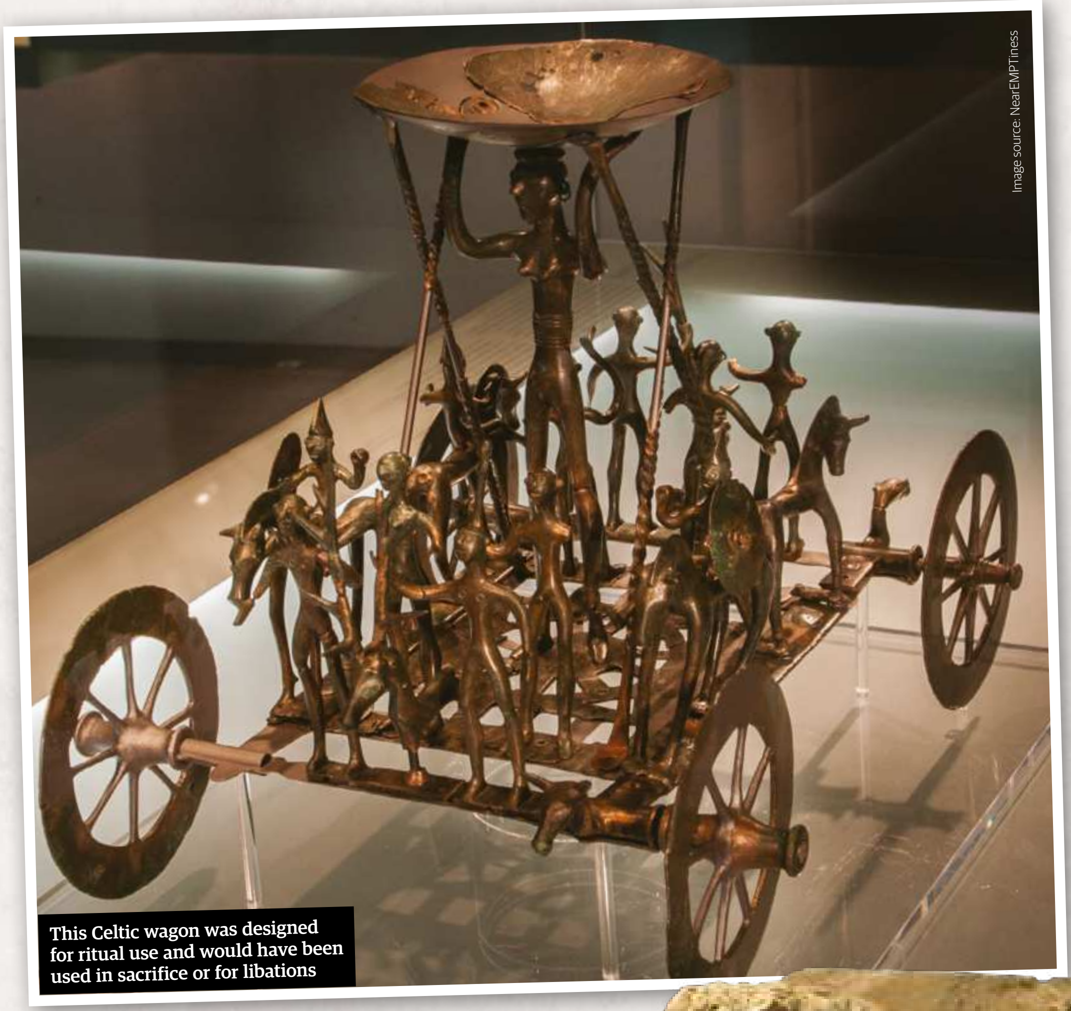


Image source: NearEMPTiness

This Celtic wagon was designed for ritual use and would have been used in sacrifice or for libations

unnerved the Romans. Many sources mention druids offering up human victims, including Caesar's description of burning them in wicker cages, and there is some evidence to support these claims. Bog bodies, corpses superbly preserved in bogs across Europe, are often found to have been ritually strangled, and must have played some part in Celtic religion.

Once Gaul and Britain were conquered in the 1st century CE the Romans set about civilising their new subjects - and that required suppression of the druids. Tacitus records how almost the entire Roman army in Britain was used to drive out the druids, finally pushing them to the Welsh island of Anglesey, on the north-western coast:

"On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair dishevelled, waving brands. All around, the Druids, lifting up their hands to heaven, and pouring forth dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers by the unfamiliar sight, so that, as if their limbs were paralysed, they stood motionless, and exposed to wounds."

The druids used all their power of language and religious authority but it was no match for legionary forces. The druidic tradition in Britain withered thereafter, though it may have survived in Ireland for several more centuries.

Yet the death of the druids was not the collapse of Celtic religion. There were still those Celts who lived outside the Roman Empire in the east. Even within the borders of the Empire people still continued to worship the old gods. The Romans did not insist on religious purity. As long as the gods of Rome were respected, and sacrifices made in the Emperor's name, then people were free to worship any other gods they wanted.

Where the Romans found Celtic sites of worship they erected temples and shrines. Springs and rivers were places where Celts offered valuable gifts to the gods. By building Roman-style temples they regularised worship there and brought the Celts into the Roman world. Romans also associated native gods with ones within their own pantheon. The Celtic Sulis worshipped at Bath became Sulis Minerva under Roman rule. Yet the influence was not all in one direction.

Epona is the Celtic goddess of the horse. For the ancient tribes horses were vital in warfare, travel, and agriculture. Though her name is Gaulish, depictions of a maiden on a horse have been found throughout Europe. In her early role she may have played a role in fertility as well. The martial Romans adopted Epona into their religion as a protector of cavalry. Apuleius describes a shrine in a stable being decorated with roses and inscriptions invoking Epona have even been found in Rome itself. Conquerers are often conquered by those they subjugate.

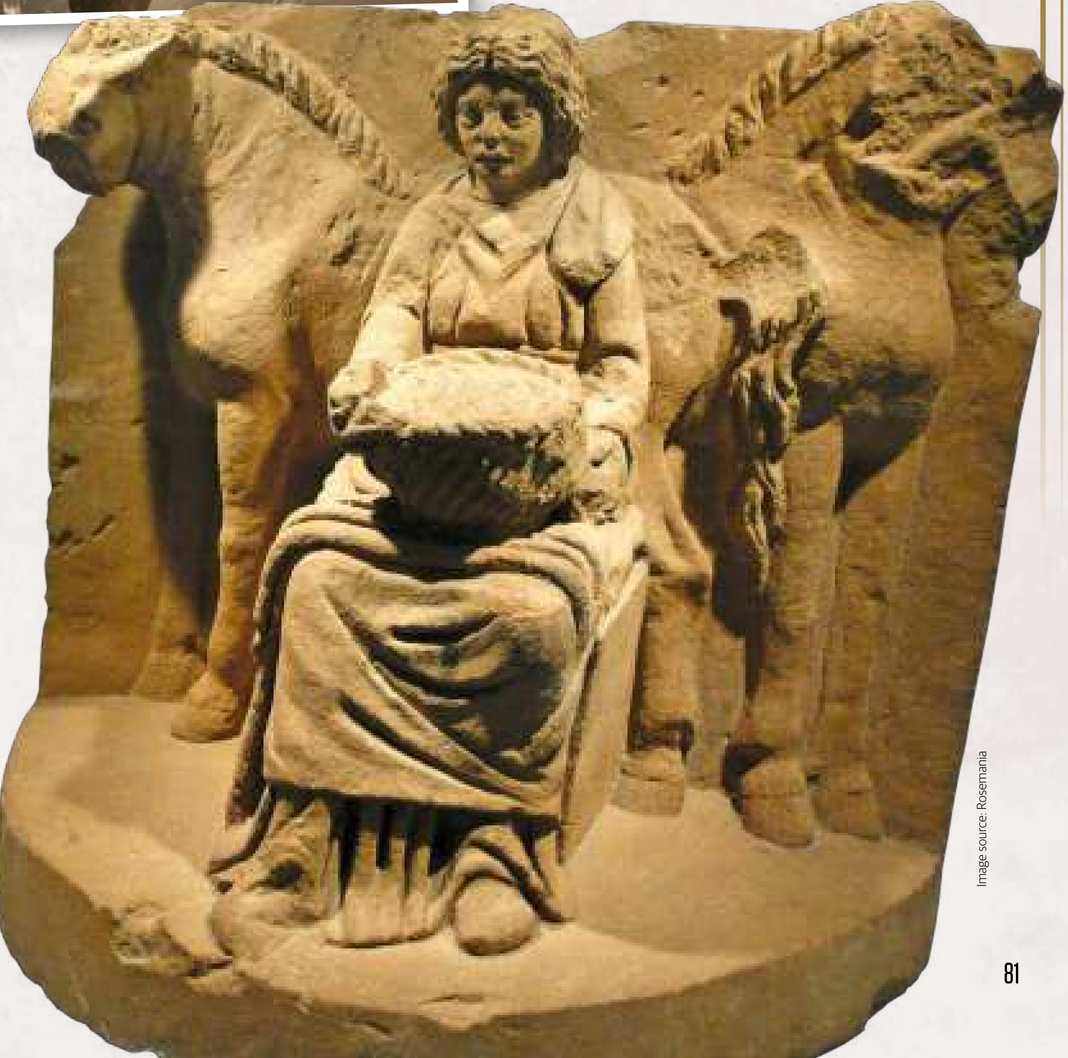


Image source: Rosemania

BRIGID: THE CELTIC ATHENA

THE CELTIC VERSION OF MINERVA AND ATHENA IS A POET'S DREAM, AND HAS SLOWLY MERGED WITH THE CHRISTIAN SAINT BRIGID

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

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Brigid had similar qualities to Athena and Minerva, being associated with craft, wisdom and metalwork

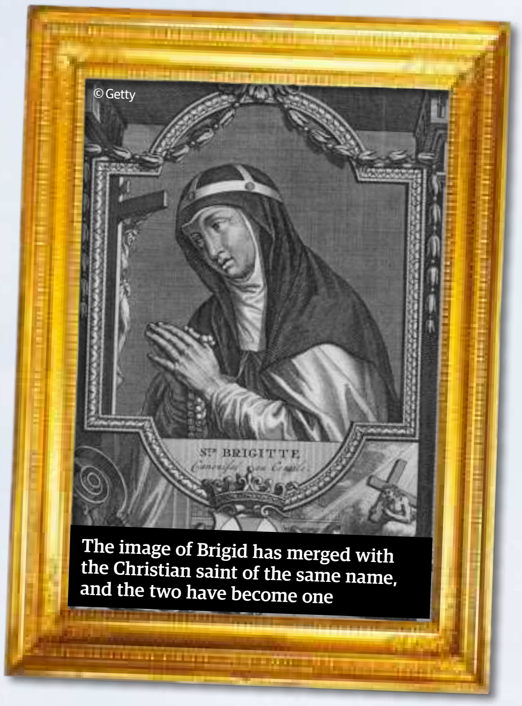
Appearing in Irish mythology as a member of the supernatural race known as the Tuatha Dé Danann, Brigid was the daughter of the Dagda and the wife of Bres, with whom she gave birth to a son named Ruadán. She also had two sisters, Brigid the healer and Brigid the smith, which has led many to see her as a triple deity. Brigid – and her continental counterpart Brigantia – is often thought to be the Celtic equivalent of the goddesses Minerva from Roman mythology and Athena from Ancient Greece, thanks to her embodying the same concept of elevated state.

As a goddess of such things as fertility, healing, poetry, smith craft and the season of spring, Brigid was great and noble, and adored by poets everywhere. In the historical *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, a collection of poems and prose narratives that tell the story of Ireland from its creation to the Middle Ages, Brigid owned two oxen named Fe and Men, as well as Torc Triath, the king of boars, and Cirb, the king of sheep, which would often cry out warnings. Her association with these beasts has lead to Brigid being known as the guardian of domesticated animals. She is also considered the patroness of medicine, arts and crafts, sacred wells and serpents, and the goddess of all things of high dimensions, including high-rising flames, highlands, hill-forts and upland areas.

During the Middle Ages, Brigid was syncretised with Christianity's Saint Brigit of Kildare, with monks taking the ancient figure of the mother goddess and absorbing her name and functions into her Christian counterpart. The version of Saint Brigid that merges the two figures is famously associated with perpetual sacred flames like that at her sanctuary in Kildare, Ireland, which is constantly maintained by a group of devoted nuns. The flame was said to be surrounded by a hedge that no man could cross. Any men who attempted to cross it were believed to be cursed to go insane, be crippled or even die.

In Kildare and other areas in the Celtic lands, Saint Brigit is still celebrated to this day. Both the goddess and the saint are often associated with holy wells, and so well dressing and the tying of clooties to the trees around the healing wells are carried out to honour them. The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Anglican Communion all celebrate the Gaelic tradition of Saint Brigid's Day, also known as Imbolc, which falls on 1 February each year.

> “AS A GODDESS OF SUCH THINGS AS FERTILITY, HEALING, POETRY, SMITH CRAFT AND THE SEASON OF SPRING, BRIGID WAS GREAT AND NOBLE, AND ADORED BY POETS EVERYWHERE”



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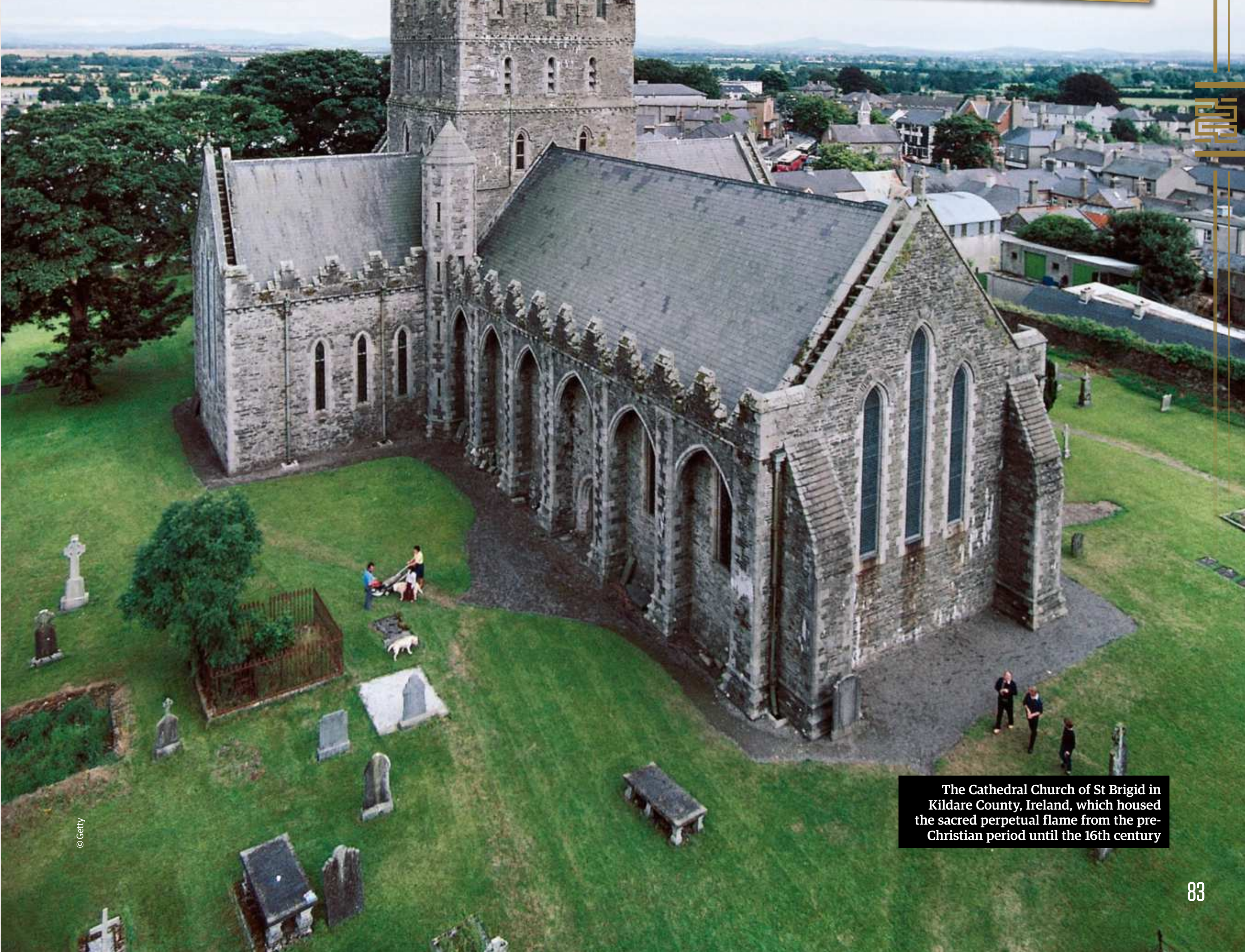
The image of Brigid has merged with the Christian saint of the same name, and the two have become one



The Cathedral Church of St Brigid in Kildare County, Ireland, which housed the sacred perpetual flame from the pre-Christian period until the 16th century

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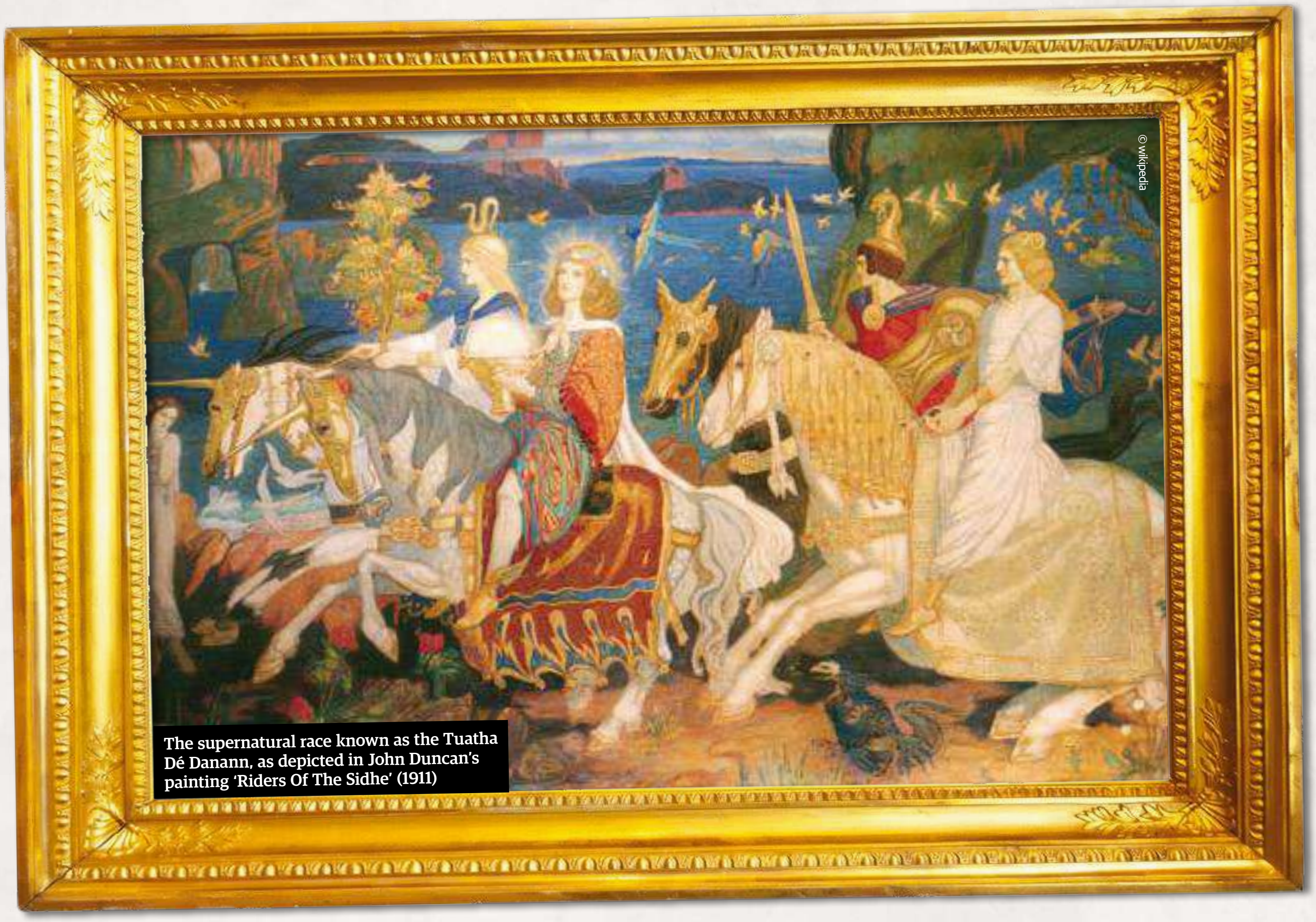

The supernatural race known as the Tuatha Dé Danann, as depicted in John Duncan's painting 'Riders Of The Sidhe' (1911)

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"OFTEN PORTRAYED AS A FATHER FIGURE, CHIEFTAIN AND DRUID, HE IS ASSOCIATED WITH MAGIC AND WISDOM, AS WELL AS FERTILITY, AGRICULTURE, MANLINESS AND STRENGTH"

The Dagda is celebrated every St Patrick's Day, with followers building effigies of the powerful god in his honour

© Getty

THE GREAT GOD: THE DAGDA

IRISH MYTHOLOGY'S ANSWER TO ODIN HOLDS GREAT POWER, WIELDING A STAFF THAT CAN TAKE LIVES WITH ONE END AND REVIVE THEM WITH THE OTHER...

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

The father of Brigid, among other deities, Irish god the Dagda was also a member of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the supernatural race that conquered the Fomorians. Often portrayed as a father figure, chieftain and druid, he is associated with magic and wisdom, as well as fertility, agriculture, manliness and strength. Many believe he controls the weather and crops, the seasons and time, and life and death.

Like many gods, the Dagda's appearance is perhaps exactly what you would expect from an all-powerful being, accessories and all. A large bearded man, he is often depicted wearing a hooded cloak. He often holds a coire ansic cauldron that never runs empty, with a ladle so big that it could scoop up two people, and a magic harp made from oak that can control emotions, change the seasons and command the order of battle. His most famous tool of all, however, is the magical staff he wields called the lord mór. It could kill nine men with one blow with one end and bring them back to life with the other.

Originating in Ireland, it is said that the Dagda dwells in Brú na Bóinne (also known as prehistoric monument Newgrange in County Meath), but is also associated with places such as Uisneach, Grianan of Aileach, Assaroe Falls and Lough Neagh, some of which are named after him.

It is believed that the Dagda's name originally came from the Proto-Celtic word Dagodeiwos, meaning 'the good god' or 'the great god', but through his life the god has gone by many epithets, most of which reflect aspects of his character. 'Eochaid Ollathair' translates as 'all-father', 'Ruad Rofhessa' as 'lord of great knowledge', 'Dáire' as 'the fertile one', 'Aed' as 'the fiery one', 'For Benn' as 'horned man' or 'man of the peak', and 'Cera' as 'creator'. A great mix of attributes has led to the Dagda being seen as one of the most important gods in Irish mythology, with him even being likened to the Germanic god Odin, the Gaulish god Sucellos and the Roman god Dīs Pater. Despite his prestige, the Dagda isn't always taken so seriously; Christian redactors have lead to the god becoming a somewhat comedic character. Even with his cauldron, harp and magic staff, the Dagda is sometimes depicted as being oafish and crude, dressed in a tiny tunic that barely covers his behind and dragging his great penis along the ground.

Newgrange's elevation, a prehistoric monument in County Meath, Ireland, is thought to be the abode of the Dagda

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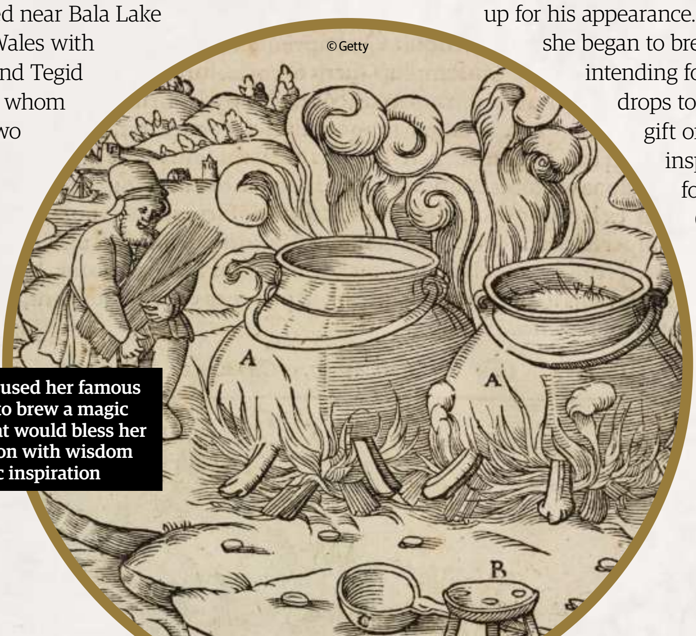
CERIDWEN AND THE TALE OF TALIESIN

IN AN ATTEMPT TO HELP HER HIDEOUS SON, ENCHANTRESS CERIDWEN CONCOCTED A POTION THAT INADVERTENTLY LEAD TO THE BIRTH OF A LEGENDARY BARD

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

Depicted as an enchantress in Welsh medieval legend and as the Celtic goddess of rebirth, transformation and inspiration by many modern Pagans, Ceridwen was a woman of great power and poetic creativity. However, she was also somewhat corrupt. Welsh scholar Ifor Williams translates the enchantress' name as 'crooked woman', which is very telling.

She lived near Bala Lake in north Wales with her husband Tegid Foel, with whom she had two children: a beautiful daughter named Creirwy and a hideously ugly son named Morfran (also known as Avagddu). Medieval Welsh poetry also often refers to her famous cauldron of poetic inspiration, which caused the ordeal that led to the vital part that Ceridwen played in Welsh mythology: the *Tale of Taliesin*.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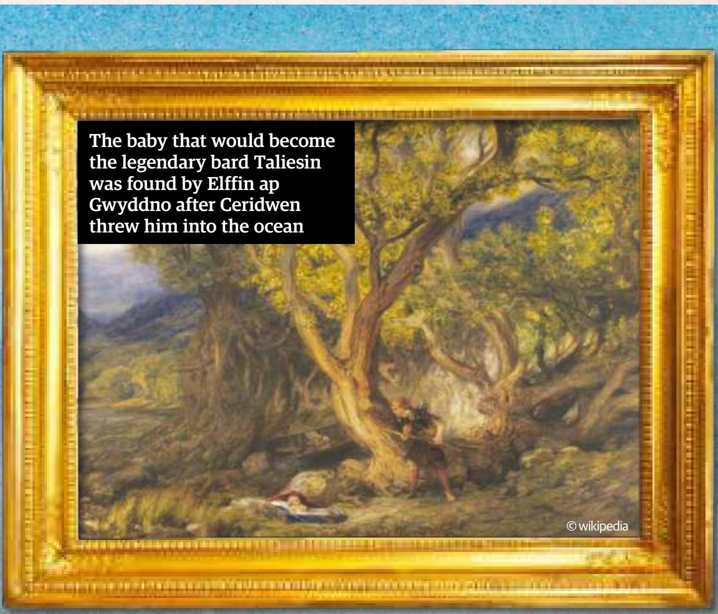
Ceridwen used her famous cauldron to brew a magic potion that would bless her hideous son with wisdom and poetic inspiration

According to the tale, Ceridwen attempted to help her ugly son by making him wise to make up for his appearance. With her cauldron she began to brew a magic potion, intending for the first three drops to give Morfran the gift of wisdom and poetic inspiration. In order for her plan to work, Ceridwen's potion had to be cooked for a year and a day, so the enchantress hired a blind man to tend to the fire beneath the cauldron while her servant, a young boy named Gwion Bach, stirred it. While stirring, three hot drops of the potion landed on Gwion's thumb, and he instinctively licked them off. In doing so, he gained the wisdom and knowledge that were intended for Morfran. With his new wisdom, it immediately occurred to him that Ceridwen would kill him for his actions, so he tried to save his skin and ran away.

Ceridwen began to chase Gwion, and the pair transformed themselves into animals – a hare and a greyhound, a fish and an otter, a bird and a hawk – until Gwion morphed into a grain of corn and Ceridwen, in the form of a hen, ate him whole. But because of the potion, he did not die. Ceridwen fell pregnant once more and resolved to kill the child once it was born. Upon giving birth, however, she found that the child was so beautiful that she could not bring herself to do it, and instead put him inside a leather bag and threw it into the ocean. The child was found by prince Elffin ap Gwyddno, who named him Taliesin, and the child later grew into the legendary bard.

Though Ceridwen is perhaps more well known in Celtic mythology, she is also a popular figure among the Pagan community, with later writers believing her to have originally been a goddess.

> “CERIDWEN WAS A WOMAN OF GREAT POWER AND POETIC CREATIVITY. HOWEVER, SHE WAS ALSO SOMEWHAT CORRUPT. WELSH SCHOLAR IFOR WILLIAMS TRANSLATES THE ENCHANTRESS’ NAME AS ‘CROOKED WOMAN’, WHICH IS VERY TELLING”



The baby that would become the legendary bard Taliesin was found by Elffin ap Gwyddno after Ceridwen threw him into the ocean

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Bala Lake in north Wales was home to Ceridwen, her husband Tegid Foel and her daughter and son, Creirwy and Morfran

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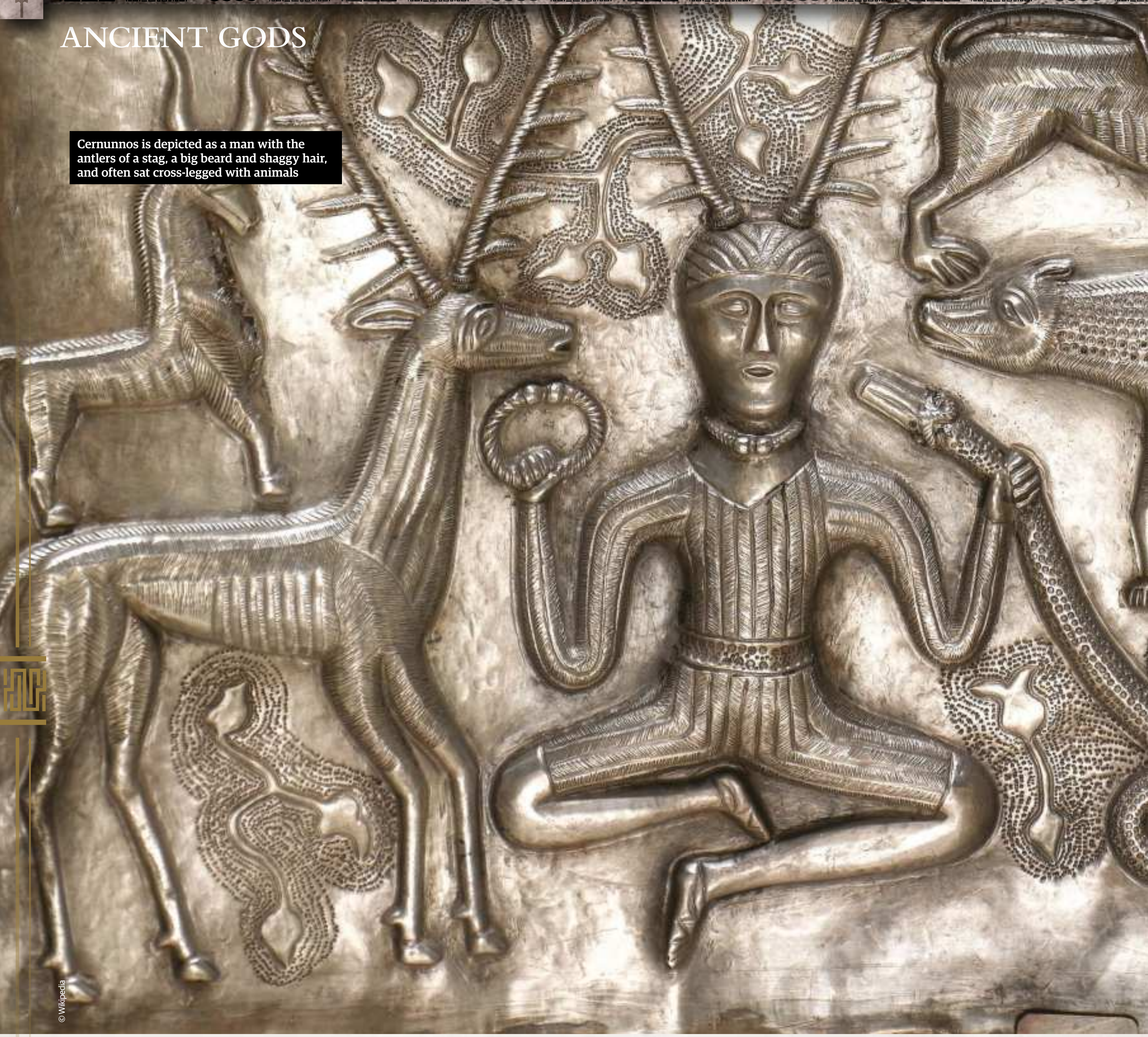

Cernunnos is depicted as a man with the antlers of a stag, a big beard and shaggy hair, and often sat cross-legged with animals

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CERNUNNOS: PROTECTOR OF THE FOREST

CERNUNNOS: PROTECTOR OF THE FOREST

> “THE HORNED GOD MAY LOOK FEROCIOUS — AND OFTEN BE MISTAKEN FOR SATAN — BUT HE IS A GENTLE PROTECTOR OF THE FOREST”

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

The Celtic god of fertility, life, animals, wealth and the underworld can be found throughout Celtic mythology, all over Gaul and among the Celtiberians, but his name – Cernunnos – is only given once on the 1st century Roman column the Pillar of the Boatmen. Elsewhere, the deity is known simply as the ‘Horned God’.

Cernunnos is something of an enigma. Very little is known about his followers, the origins of his name or even his significance within Celtic religion. Depictions of him can be found in many parts of the British Isles and western Europe, which usually show him as a man with shaggy hair, a beard and the antlers of a stag, holding or wearing torcs and seated cross-legged amongst animals. With his powerful antlers, Cernunnos is a protector of the forest and master of the hunt, and is often connected with male animals, particularly the stag in rut.

Though Cernunnos may look ferocious, he as actually far from it. In some traditions, he is the god of death and dying, but he takes the time to comfort the dead and sing to them as they enter the spirit world. Because of his horns (as well as the fact that he is occasionally depicted with a large, erect phallus), some people often wrongly interpret Cernunnos’ image as being a symbol of Satan, with some among the Christian church misinterpreting the Pagan following of the god as Devil worship. Nowadays, Pagan traditions like to honour Cernunnos as being an embodiment of masculine energy, fertility and power.

Other traditions, particularly the newer ones, see the cycle of the seasons as following the relationship between the Horned God (also known as Cernunnos) and the Goddess: in autumn, he dies with the vegetation and then during the spring time, at Imbolc, he is resurrected and impregnates the fertile goddess of the land. However, the concept of the relationship between the Horned God and the Goddess is relatively new, and there is no evidence to suggest that ancient people may have celebrated it too.

During celebrations, followers like to present the god with offerings in forests and other wooded areas. Many take a chalice of wine, milk or consecrated water to pour upon the ground while calling to him, and adorn altars with his symbols, namely leaves, shed antlers, moss and new soil, while those who wish to conceive sometimes call upon Cernunnos to bless the conception.

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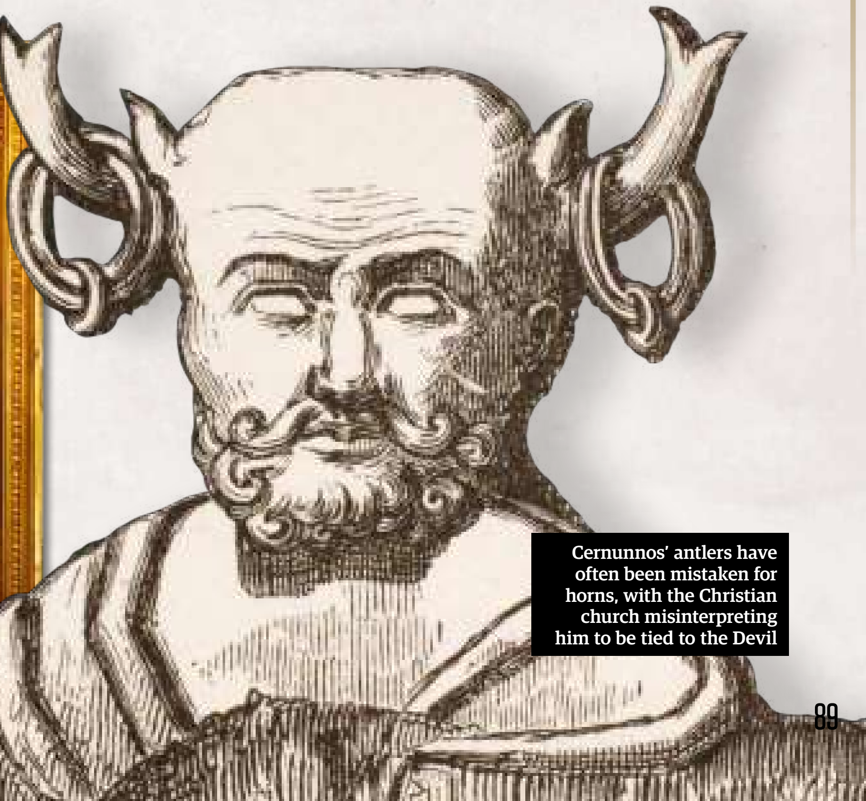
Images of the Horned God have been found in many parts of the British Isles and western Europe, leading him to gain lots of followers



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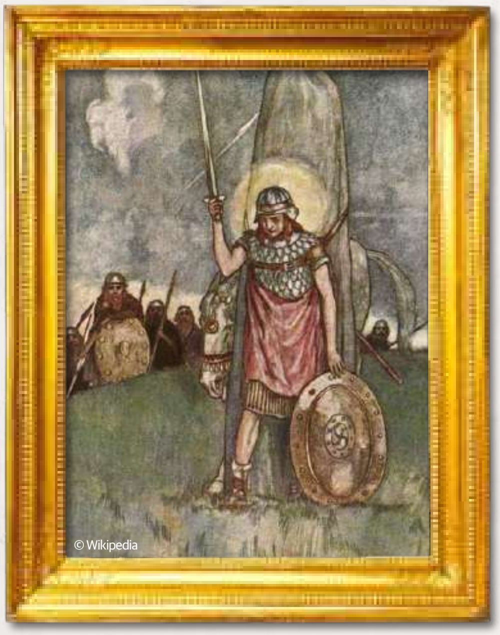
Cernunnos’ antlers have often been mistaken for horns, with the Christian church misinterpreting him to be tied to the Devil

THE MORRÍGAN

IF A WARRIOR SAW A BLACK CROW IN BATTLE, THEY WOULD PRAY IT WASN'T SHAPESHIFTER THE MORRÍGAN, PREDICTING THEIR DEATH...

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

Associated with war, destiny and fate, Irish mythological figure the Morrígan brings with her a sense of foreboding. She is known for foretelling doom, death and victory, and her name roughly translates to 'queen of phantoms'. As a shapeshifter, she frequently appeared in the form of a black crow known as the badb, which became an ominous sign for those that saw her before marching into battle. However, as well as foretelling death, she could also incite warriors to battle and help them win victories. She would encourage soldiers to do brave deeds and strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, and is often depicted washing the bloodstained clothes of those who were fated to die.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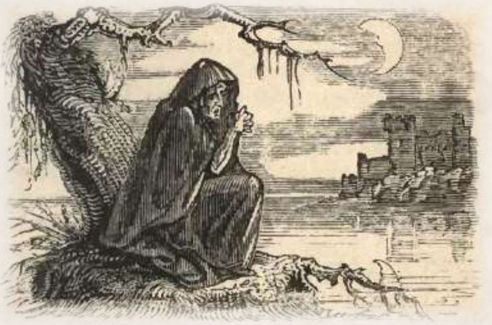
The Morrígan confronted Cúchulainn after he insulted her, and foretold of his ill fate in an oncoming battle

Like many other gods, the Morrígan is sometimes believed to be a trio of deities, all sisters, known as 'the three Morrígna'. Some name the trio Badb, Macha and Nemain, while some remember them as a triad of land goddess named Ériu, Banda and Fódla. Others believe that each name belongs to the same goddess. The Morrígan is the envious wife of the Irish god known as the Dagda and, in later folklore, is often associated with the banshee, a female spirit in Irish mythology that heralds the death of a family member with her blood-curdling wail.

The Morrígan made her first recorded appearance in mythology in stories of the *Ulster Cycle*, which sees her embark on an ambiguous relationship with the hero Cúchulainn. He encounters the Morrígan but does not recognise her as she drives a heifer from his land. Not knowing of her supreme power, he insults her. But before he can lay a hand on her she transforms into a black bird and sits on a nearby branch. Realising who she is, Cúchulainn pleads that if he had known before he would not have insulted her and the pair would have parted amicably. But it's too late: the Morrígan tells him that whatever he had done and said to her would have brought him bad luck. He insists that she cannot harm him, and she delivers him a series of warnings in response, foretelling an oncoming battle in which he will be killed by his enemies. She says, "It is at the guarding of thy death that I am; and I shall be."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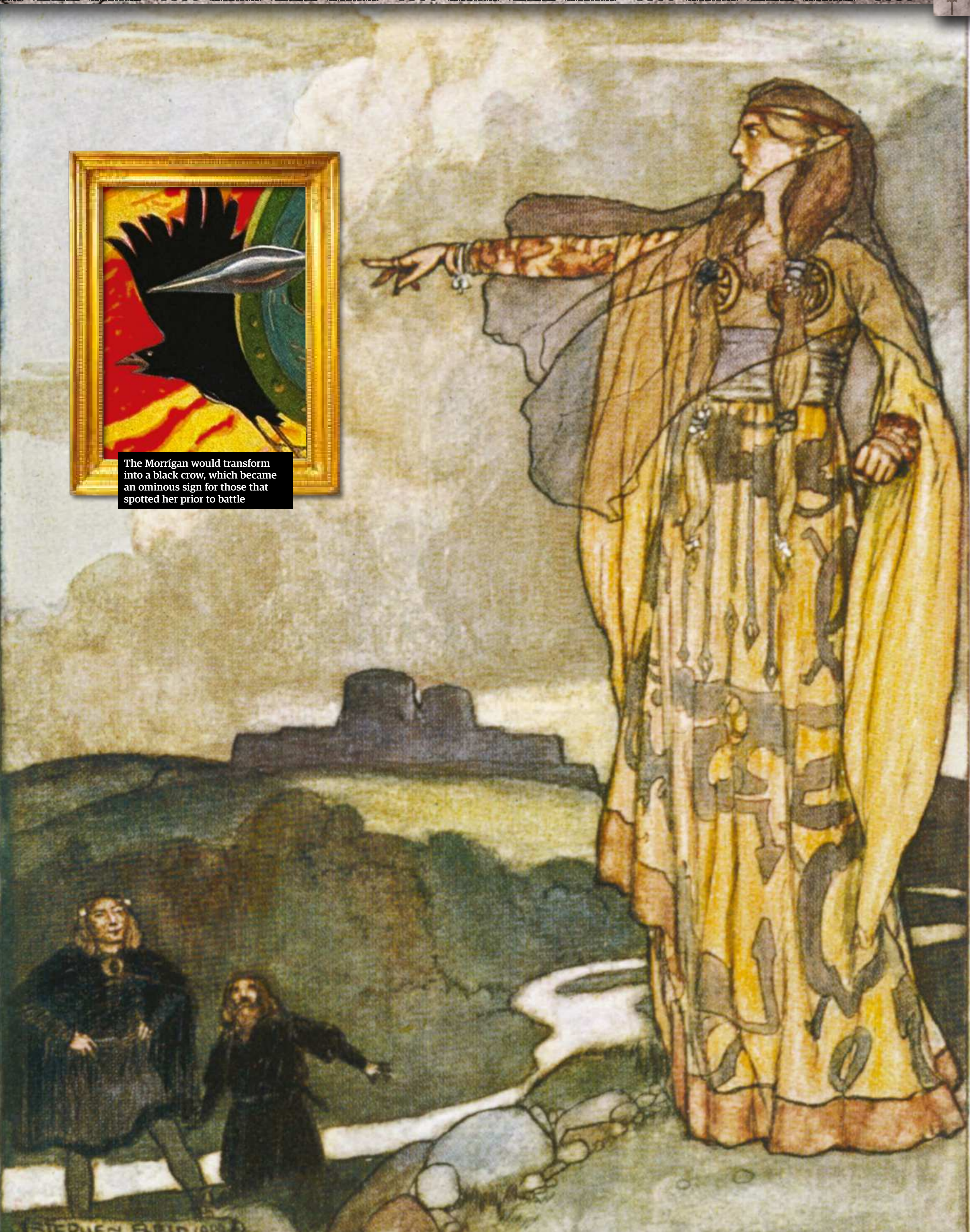
The goddess is often associated with the banshee in later folklore, who would wail at the beckoning death of a family member

> "AS A SHAPESHIFTER, SHE FREQUENTLY APPEARED IN THE FORM OF A BLACK CROW KNOWN AS THE BADB, WHICH BECAME AN OMINOUS SIGN FOR THOSE THAT SAW HER BEFORE MARCHING INTO BATTLE"



The Morrígan would transform into a black crow, which became an ominous sign for those that spotted her prior to battle

LUGH:

THE GOD OF SUN AND STORM

A GOD OF OATH, TRUTH, LAW AND MANY DISCIPLES, LUGH IS A POWERFUL SAVIOUR THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO MESS WITH…

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

Lugh was adopted by the sea god Manannán mac Lir, who gifted him his legendary sword known as Fragarach

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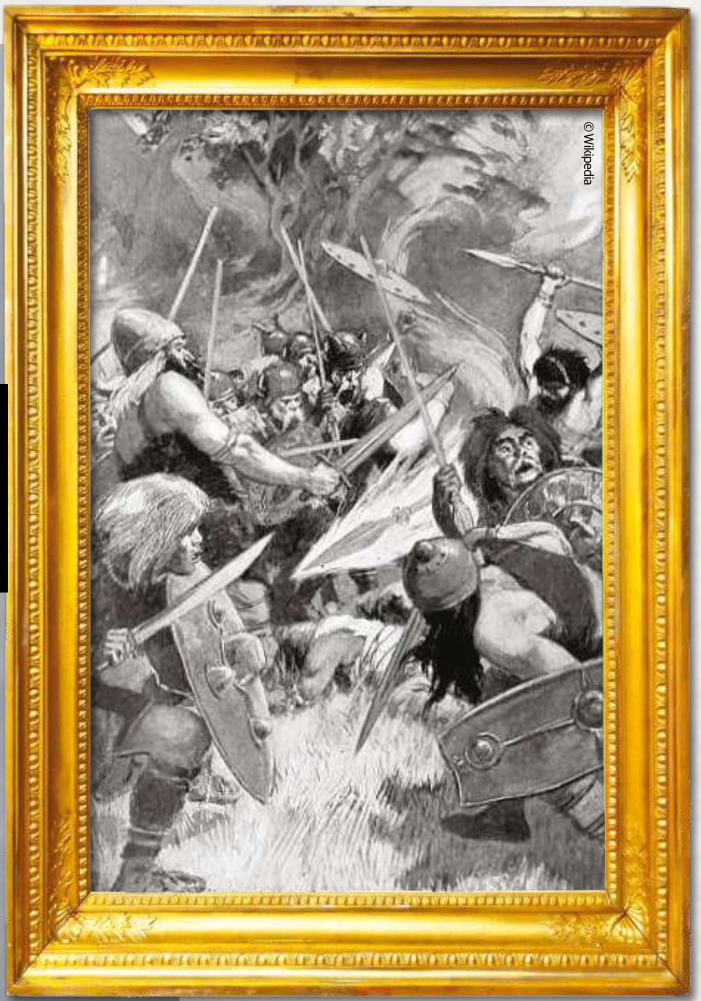

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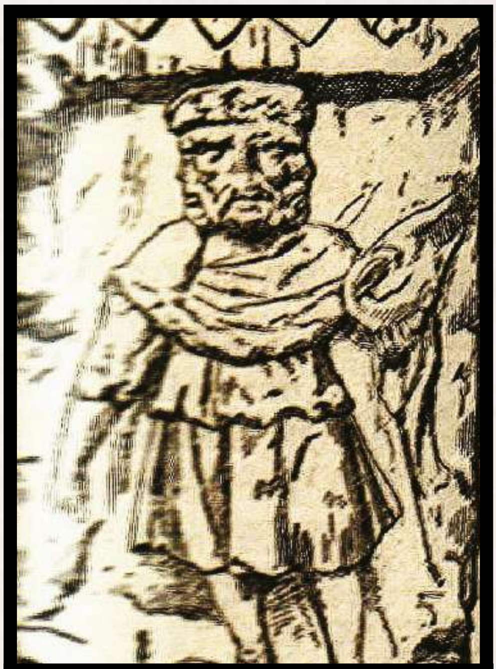
Lugh is known for his magical spear, as depicted in this illustration by Harold Robert Millar, published in *Celtic Myth And Legend* (1905) by Charles Squire



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Lugh is a god of mastery of disciplines, including arts and crafts, as well as oath, law, truth and kingship

Portrayed as a warrior, a king, a master craftsman, a saviour and a member of the supernatural race known as the Tuatha Dé Danann, Lugh is one of the most prominent gods in all of Irish mythology. Supremely skilled and a god of mastery in multiple disciplines, he is often associated with oaths, truth, the law and rightful kingship, as well as being seen as both a storm god, with thunderstorms in County Mayo being referred to as battles between Lugh and his grandfather Balor the Strong-Smiter, and a Sun god, symbolising enlightenment as he brings light to the world.

Beautiful and fair-haired, Lugh was born from a relationship between Balor's daughter Ethne and a young man named Cian of the Tuatha Dé Danann. He was later adopted by the Irish goddess Tailtiu, while his adopted father was the mighty sea god Manannán mac Lir.

Like several other gods, Lugh is rarely depicted without his magical possessions: an unstoppable fiery spear, a sling stone and a sword. According to the text of *The Four Jewels of the Tuatha Dé Danann*, Lugh's spear was impossible to overcome. Other texts state that the tip had to be kept in a pot of water to stop it igniting when he threw it. Lugh was a master with his trusty sling stone and even used it to kill Balor in the Battle of Magh Tuired. His sword is often referred to as Fragarach, or 'the answerer', and once belonged to Manannán, who gifted it to him in the assembly of the Tuatha Dé Danann in *The Fate of the Children of Tuireann*.

Lugh didn't only have weapons on his side. He is often depicted riding a horse named Aonbharr, which could travel over land and sea, and was also given to him by Manannán. When the Children of Tuireann asked Lugh if they could borrow his horse, he refused, saying it would not be proper to loan a loan. Instead, he loaned them his magic boat, known as the 'Wave-Sweeper'.

Despite his might, Lugh is often portrayed in folklore as something of a trickster. He is associated with the harvest festival Lughnasadh, which carries his name, and is also believed to have invented ball games, horse racing and fidchell, the Gaelic equivalent of chess.

"LIKE SEVERAL OTHER GODS, LUGH IS RARELY DEPICTED WITHOUT HIS MAGICAL POSSESSIONS: AN UNSTOPPABLE FIERY SPEAR, A SLING STONE AND A SWORD"

THE WORLD OF SOVEREIGNTY GODDESSES

FAMOUS MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS LIKE GUINEVERE AND CAILLEACH HAVE BEEN INTERPRETED AS SOVEREIGNTY GODDESSES, BUT MODERN SCHOLARS OFTEN THINK OTHERWISE…

WRITTEN BY: POPPY-JAY PALMER

Used almost exclusively in Celtic mythology, the term 'sovereignty goddess' refers to a goddess who, personifying a territory, grants sovereignty upon kings by either marrying them or having sex with them. Over time, the tradition has become one of the most well-known and studied thematic elements of Celtic myth.

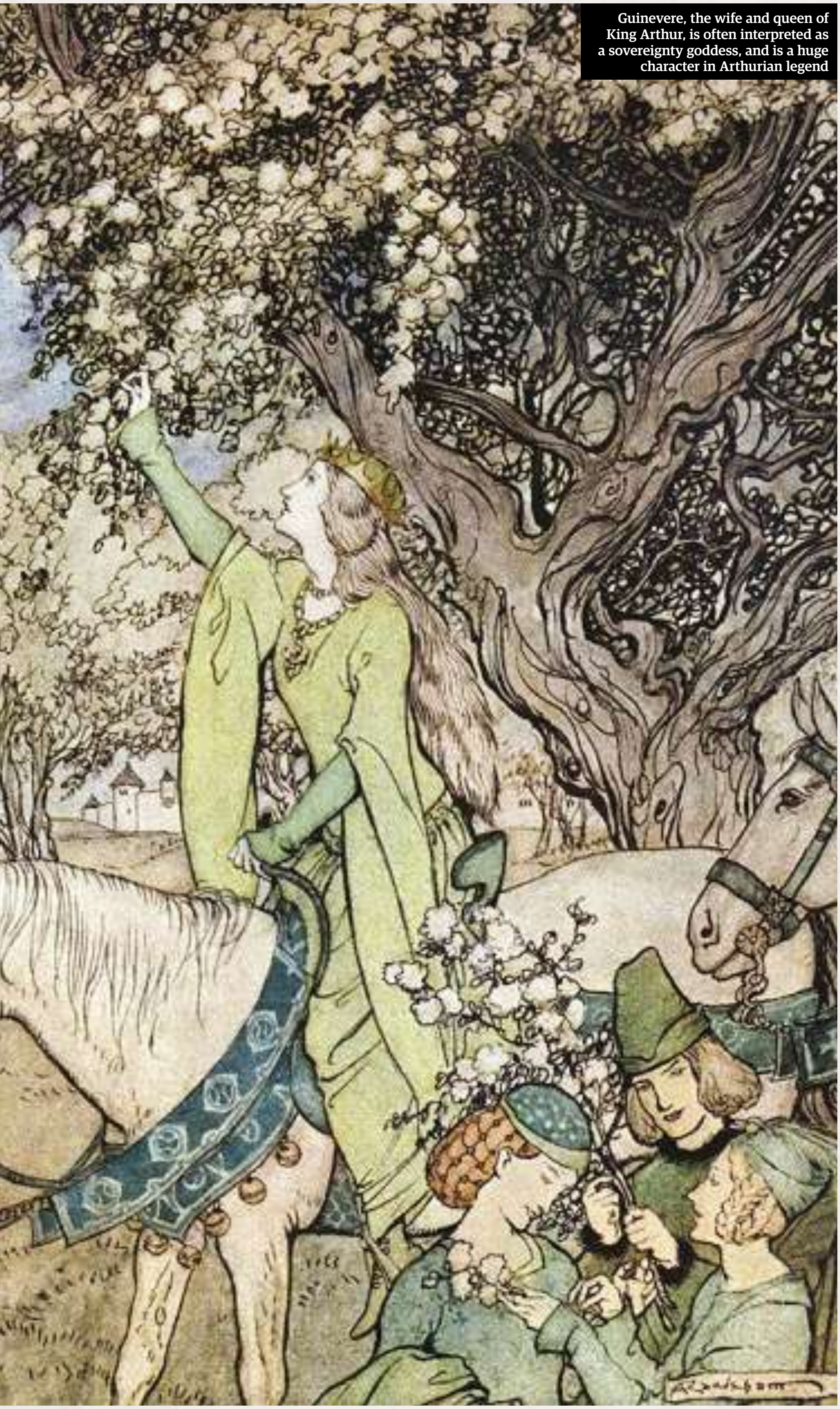
One of the most famous figures to be read as a sovereignty goddess is Guinevere, the wife and queen of King Arthur of Welsh Arthurian legend. Her character varies greatly, depending on where you look, with her being portrayed as everything from a villain and an opportunistic trailer to a noble and virtuous but complex lady. Another is the Cailleach of Gaelic mythology, known in Scotland as Beira, Queen of Winter. She is said to be the mother of all gods and goddesses. Some believe Beira is responsible for forming many mountains and hills simply by striding across the land and dropping rocks from her wicker basket, while others believe she built the mountains internationally, to serve as her stepping-stones. She is often depicted carrying a hammer, which she used to shape the hills and valleys.

Medb, the queen of Connacht in the *Ulster Cycle* of Irish mythology, is also read as a sovereignty goddess. She was known for having a number of royal husbands, the most notable of which was Ailill Mac Máta, the king of Connacht. Strong-willed, cunning and often promiscuous, Medb was believed to be fair haired and so beautiful that her form robbed men of two-thirds of their valour upon casting eyes upon her. She was a warrior queen and was the inspiration for the fairy Queen Mab in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

"ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS FIGURES TO BE READ AS A SOVEREIGNTY GODDESS IS GUINEVERE, THE WIFE AND QUEEN OF KING ARTHUR OF WELSH ARTHURIAN LEGEND"

Rhiannon is a major figure in the medieval Welsh story collection known as the *Mabinogion*, but she is also often interpreted as a sovereignty goddess, and related to the Gaulish horse goddess Epona. She was a beautiful, intelligent and politically strategic Otherworld woman, but she was also strange and magical. Everything about her was a paradox, from the way she rode her horse – slowly, but unreachably – to her small bag, which was enchanted and could not be filled by ordinary means.

Though many female characters of myth have been labelled sovereignty goddesses in the past, the term has also been criticised in recent times, leading to Celtic scholarship interpreting other mythical female characters as euhemerised sovereignty goddesses, or arguing that the portrayals of women have been negatively influenced by traditions of these goddesses.



Guinevere, the wife and queen of King Arthur, is often interpreted as a sovereignty goddess, and is a huge character in Arthurian legend

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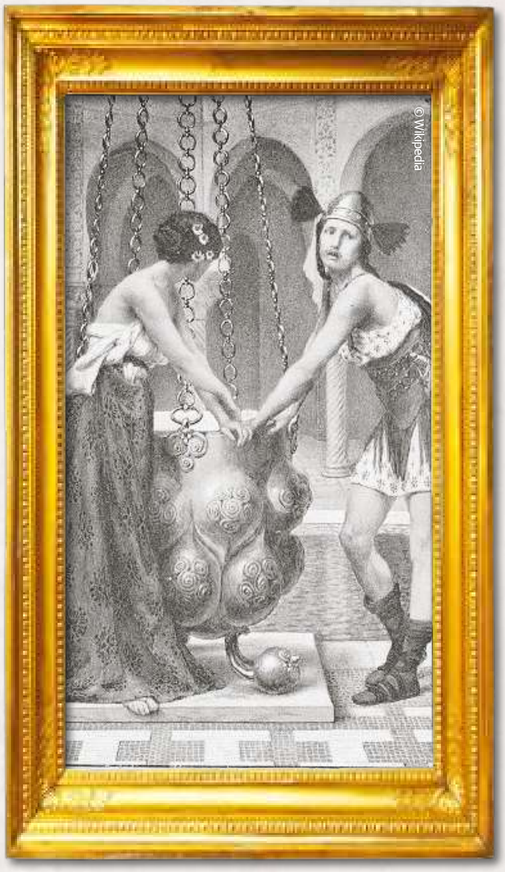

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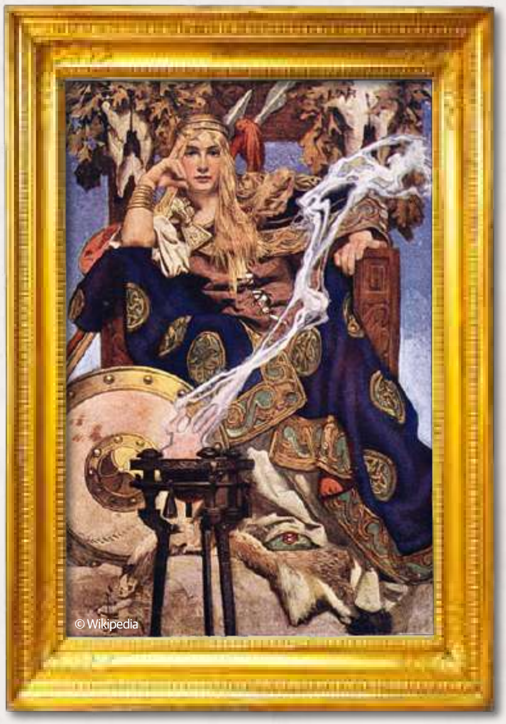
Rhiannon is featured in myth collection the *Mabinogion*, but is also seen by many to be a goddess



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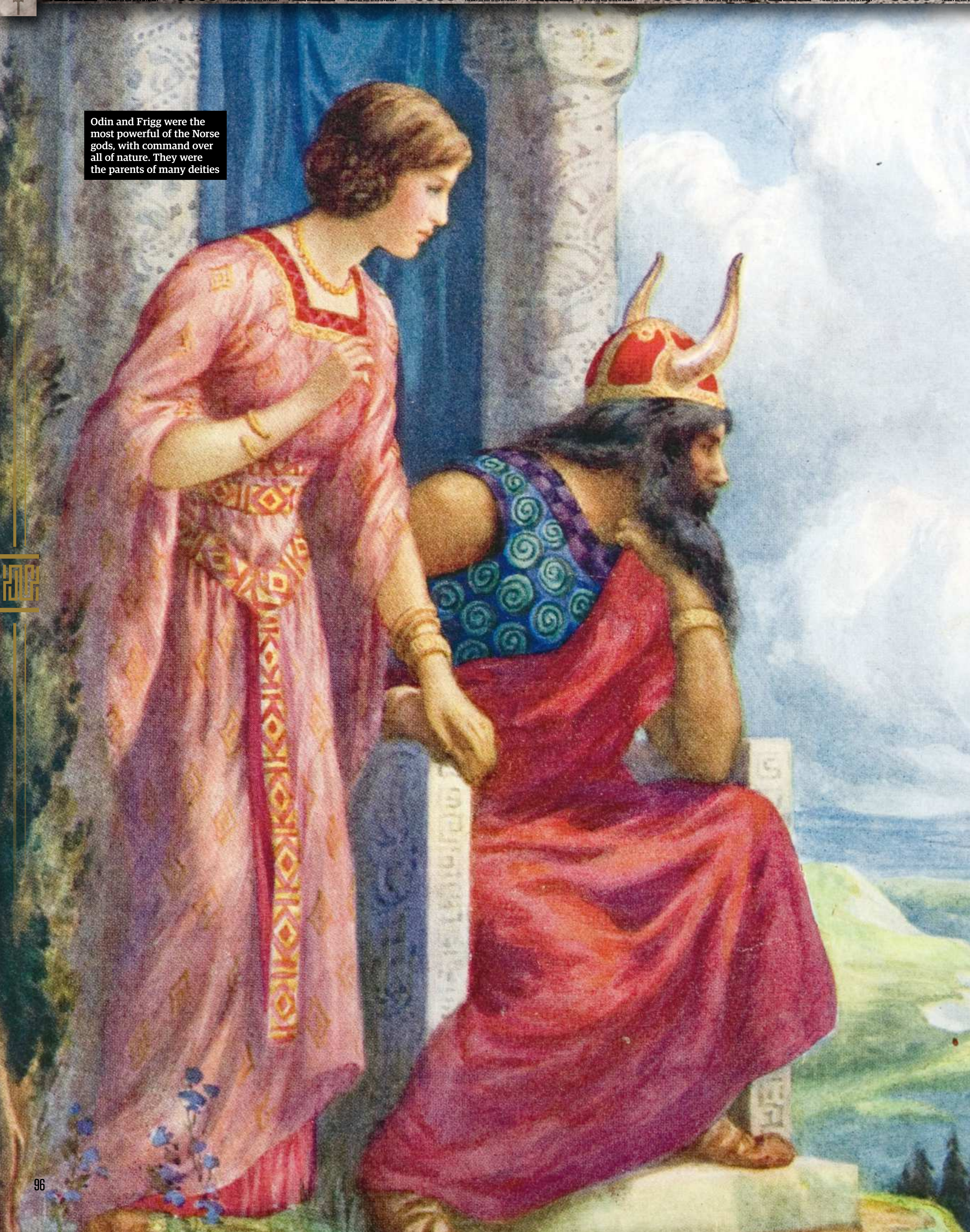
Medb was a sovereignty goddess and queen of Irish mythology who married many times, and had many royal husbands



Odin and Frigg were the most powerful of the Norse gods, with command over all of nature. They were the parents of many deities

GODS OF THE NORTH

IN ICY REALMS BEYOND CHILLY SEAS, THE PEOPLE OF THE UTTERMOST NORTH WORSHIPPED GODS THAT REFLECTED THE REALITIES OF THEIR WORLD – BUT HOW MUCH OF THEIR THEOLOGY WAS A LATER, CHRISTIAN INVENTION?

WRITTEN BY: APRIL MADDEN

Before the worlds of the Norse were nine in number, there were just two of them: Muspelheim, the place of fire, and Niflheim, the place of cold, where the snake-haunted spring Hvergelmir rose to feed the bitter waters of the Élivágar rivers. Where the two bordered each other was Ginnungagap, the primal void. As the ice-rime winds of Niflheim met the spark-flashing breezes of Muspelheim in the soft, warm-wet centre of the void, fog brewed. Here, amid weather as mild as a Nordic dream of summer, the sleeping giant Ymir was formed:

"Of old was the age when Ymir lived;
Sea nor cool waves nor sand there were;
Earth had not been, nor heaven above,
But a yawning gap, and grass nowhere."

So says the third stanza of *Völuspá*, the great prophecy-poem in which a sorceress recounts the beginning and end of the world to the chief god, Odin. *Völuspá* forms part of the *Poetic Edda* (the anonymous, verse collection of many Norse myths), and is found in its entirety in two hand-scribed Scandinavian books of the medieval era, the Icelandic 'book of kings' *Codex Regius* and the later *Hauksbók*, a record of Icelandic history and myth set down by the scribe and lawspeaker Haukr Erlendsson. This Norse creation myth goes on to recount how Ymir sweated in his sleep; his sweat produced the first jötnar, or giants. Ymir was nourished on milk from the primeval cow Auðumbla, who licked salt from the ice of Ginnungagap. One day she revealed the form of a man, Búri. Búri had a son, Borr (it's not specified how), who married the jötunn Bestla. Together they had three children, Odin, Vili and Vé. The three god-children, the first of the Æsir gods, slayed Ymir and built the world from his corpse. The poem *Grímnismál* says:

"Out of Ymir's flesh was fashioned the earth,
And the ocean out of his blood;
Of his bones the hills, of his hair the trees,
Of his skull the heavens high."

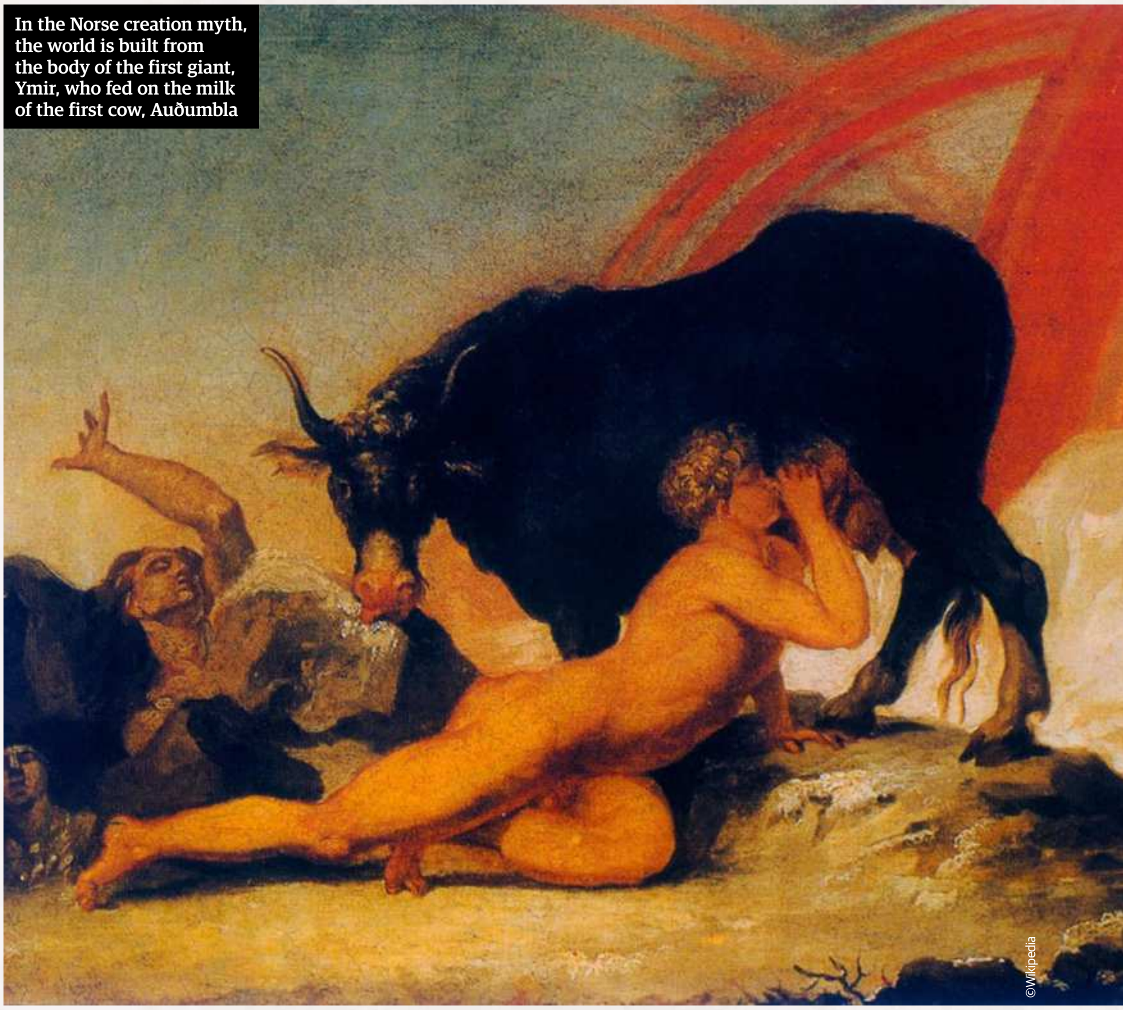
Vili and Vé are barely mentioned again in Norse mythology – in the *Lokasenna*, the poem that tells the tale of the 'flyting', or mockery, of Loki, the eponymous god of mischief and magic taunts Odin by saying that the great god's wife slept with Vili and Vé while Odin was away on business. But Loki himself can also form another triad with Odin: in another story, three gods – Hœnir, Lóðurr (or Loki) and Odin – find two trees on the newly formed Midgard – the 'middle' world, made from

THE SACRED TREE

The cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasil, metaphysically connects the nine worlds of Norse cosmology: the worlds of ice and fire, of humans, elves, giants, and dwarves, of the two families of gods, and of the dead. The tree itself is populated by deer and dragons and birds; a squirrel called Ratatoskr runs up and down it, gnawing its bark and branches and sowing dissent among its highest and lowest denizens. Beneath it, the three Norns (analogous to the Fates) weave the destinies of gods and men.

The name of the tree is said to mean 'Odin's Horse', but it's not referring to his eight-legged steed Sleipnir, son of Loki. In this context, 'horse' is a back-kenning for 'gallows'. A kenning is a metaphor in Norse; a common kenning for gallows was 'horse of the hanged'; therefore the horse of Odin is the gallows he was hanged on. But why was Odin hanged? Odin was a culture hero god; he gave his people wisdom, and poetry, and finally the runes - the Norse Futhark script that was both mundane and magical. Hanging himself from Yggdrasil was how Odin acquired his knowledge of the runes:

"I know that I hung on a wind-rocked tree,
nine whole nights,
with a spear wounded, and to Odin offered,
myself to myself;
on that tree, of which no one knows
from what root it springs.
Bread no one gave me, nor a horn of drink,
downward I peered,
to runes applied myself, wailing learnt them,
then fell down thence."


In the Norse creation myth, the world is built from the body of the first giant, Ymir, who fed on the milk of the first cow, Auðumbla

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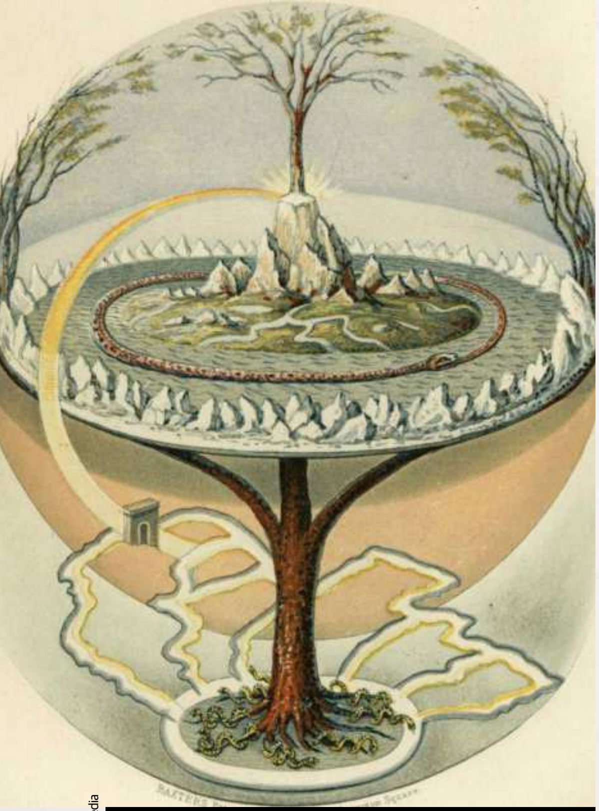
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In Norse cosmology, the nine worlds are connected by the world tree, a giant ash called Yggdrasil

"FOR CENTURIES, NORSE MYTH WAS RECORDED, PRESERVED AND PASSED ON ORALLY BY THE LAWSPEAKERS"

the eyebrows of Ymir - and bestow gifts on them, giving them sentience, agency, and humanity.

"Spirit they possessed not, sense they had not,
blood nor motive powers, nor goodly colour.
Spirit gave Odin, sense gave Hœnir,
blood gave Lóðurr, and goodly colour."

The two become the first humans, Ask and his wife Embla. The etymology of Embla is unknown - it may mean 'vine', or it may mean 'hard work' - but Ask is more obvious: it means 'ash tree', akin to the vast conceptual ash tree Yggdrasil that links the nine worlds of Norse cosmology.

If some of this creation myth sounds familiar, there's a reason for that. For centuries, Norse myth was recorded, preserved and passed on orally, by the lawspeakers who memorised and transmitted the laws and lore of the people, and by the völva, or sorceresses, who shamanically interpreted them. Norse myth was only written down from the 8th century CE onwards, when Christianisation began its slow sweep across Scandinavia. The men who wrote it down wanted to preserve their indigenous myth, but they also wanted to be good, modern Christians who'd put the bloody heathenry of the past behind them. In a dazzling display of homonymic freestyling, the 13th century Icelandic lawspeaker Snorri Sturluson, author of the *Prose Edda*, derives the etymology of Æsir from 'Asia' and recasts the gods of the north as refugees from the fall of Troy, as told in Homer's *Iliad*. He's following historical precedent - Rome's national epic, the *Aeneid*, written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BCE, claims Roman descent from Aeneas of Troy; Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th century *Historia Regum Britanniae* makes the same claim for the Britons via Aeneas' descendant Brutus, and it's likely from Geoffrey that Snorri got the idea of syncretising the gods of his forefathers with the noble but beaten classical heroes of the Trojan War. The device gave both authors (and Virgil before them) a get-out clause that gave their mythology the respectability of ancient civilisation while allowing them to elide over endemic 'old', 'rustic', and 'backward' pagan faiths. Snorri is pretty explicit about excusing his polytheistic forebears for

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE THE MYTH OF BALDR AS UNTOUCHED BY CHRISTIAN, OR EVEN BABYLONIAN, THEOLOGY”

assuming the ‘Trojan’ Æsir were gods, because of their good looks, cleverness, magical abilities, and level of civilisation.

With that little bit of Christian-classical doublethink out of the way, Snorri largely focuses on telling tales of the gods that would have been more familiar to their audience from fireside stories than they were from religious rites. Many Norse myths explain earthly phenomena that their listeners would have observed. The heat shimmer of a summer’s day is explained as the tricksy Loki herding goats or sowing oats. The kink in a salmon’s tail is because he once hid beneath a waterfall in that form, until thunder-god Thor caught him by the back fins and pulled him out to answer for his crimes. Earthquakes are the result of Loki shuddering with pain from the agonising punishment inflicted on him thereafter.

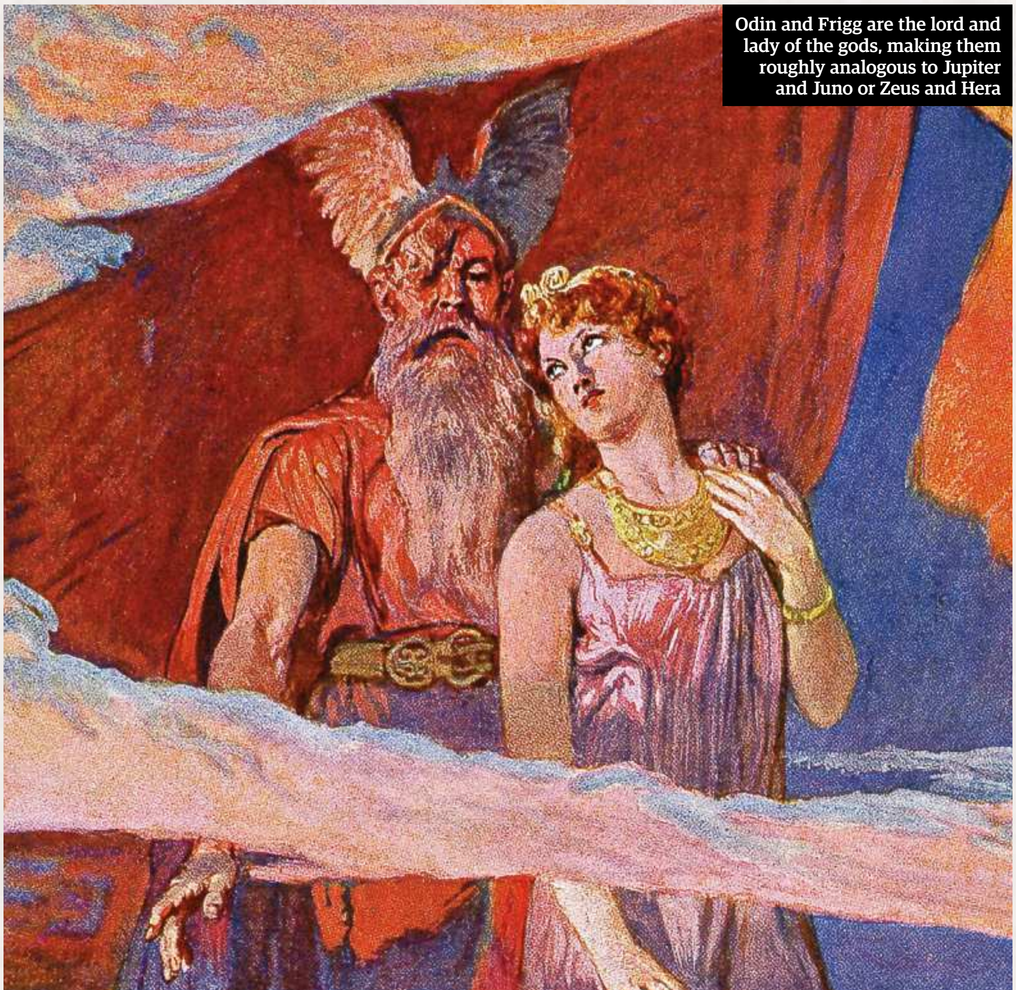
Other tales illustrate desirable personality traits, or the mechanics of the social traditions that made Norse society function. Odin, the Allfather, great god of wisdom, is often depicted as taking on the form of an elderly traveller. He frequents halls and farmsteads, pushing their human owners to break the bonds of guest-friendship and then punishing them, involving himself in riddle games that eventually reveal some home truths to his hapless human interlocutors, or, more rarely, rewarding the good with knowledge, wealth and/or power in return for their hospitality. Yet more tales explain how the gods built their halls in the holy realm of Asgard, how they interact with each other as lovers, enemies and family members, and how they fought with another pantheon in the first-ever armed conflict, the Æsir-Vanir War.

While many stories give us a glimpse into the mind of the pre-Christian Norse, many of their myths are also inflected with other ideas. It’s impossible to see the myth of Baldr as untouched by Christian, or even earlier Babylonian, theology. Baldr, son of Odin and his wife Frigg, is the god of all that is good and beautiful, of sunlight and day and rulership. Loki’s daughter, Hel, queen of the dead, wants him for her own. Frigg has extracted a promise from everything in the realms that it will not harm Baldr; the only thing she hasn’t bothered with is the small and insignificant mistletoe. When Loki discovers the youths of Asgard playing a game of throwing all manner of objects at the protected Baldr, he gives the god’s blind brother, Hodr, a dart of mistletoe. Hodr throws it true, it hits his brother, and Baldr dies. Hel agrees to return Baldr from the underworld if everything will mourn for him, but Loki transforms himself into a dry-eyed little old lady-giant named Þökk (‘Thanks’), and refuses to weep:

“Þökk will weep
waterless tears
For Baldr’s bale-fare;
Living or dead,
I loved not the churl’s son;
Let Hel hold to that she hath!”

Baldr is predicted to return from death after Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods; the world-ending apocalypse of Norse myth, after which he will usher in a bright new world order. Whatever the origins of this myth, the men who later wrote it down clearly had the Biblical Book of Revelation’s Second Coming of Christ in mind. But Baldr’s not the only figure that would later be associated with the new god the Norse once called ‘the White Christ’. One theory even suggests that the scapegrace Loki, by destroying the old gods at Ragnarök, thereby makes theological room for the ‘true’ salvation of Christianity, making him (metaphorically) either Christ, the evangelist John the Baptist, or one of the angels.

It’s impossible to say whether the Norse as a whole really thought this, whether it was the idle theological musing of a Christian cleric, or a later analogical theory. Still, to this day, Nordic royal family trees have room at the roots for Odin, Thor, and many of the other old gods. Perhaps this is why, despite its peoples’ medieval enthusiasm for Christianisation, Scandinavia managed to preserve many of the myths of its ancient deities, largely intact, for over 1,000 years.


Odin and Frigg are the lord and lady of the gods, making them roughly analogous to Jupiter and Juno or Zeus and Hera

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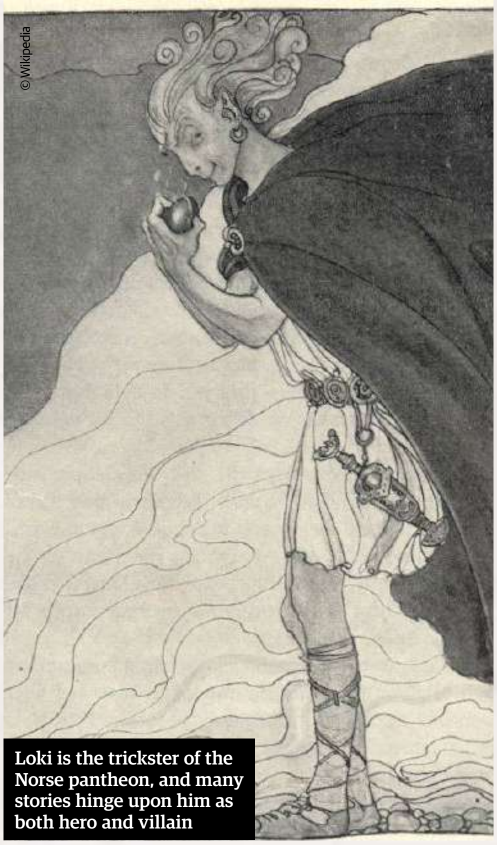
Loki is the trickster of the Norse pantheon, and many stories hinge upon him as both hero and villain

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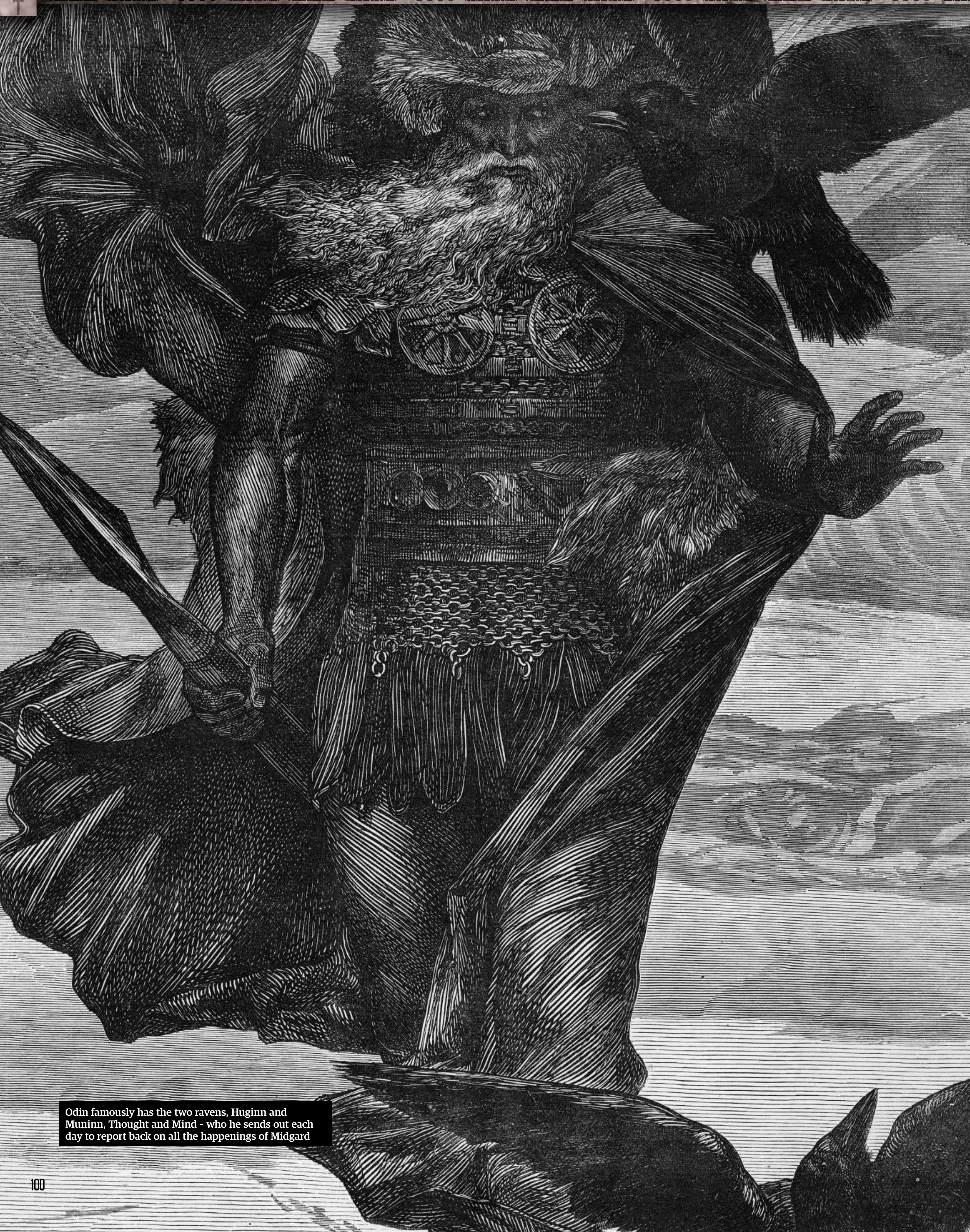


Odin famously has the two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, Thought and Mind - who he sends out each day to report back on all the happenings of Midgard

ODIN: THE ALLFATHER

GOD OF KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM, HEALING AND DEATH, ODIN IS A COMPLEX FIGURE THAT HAS FASCINATED FOR CENTURIES

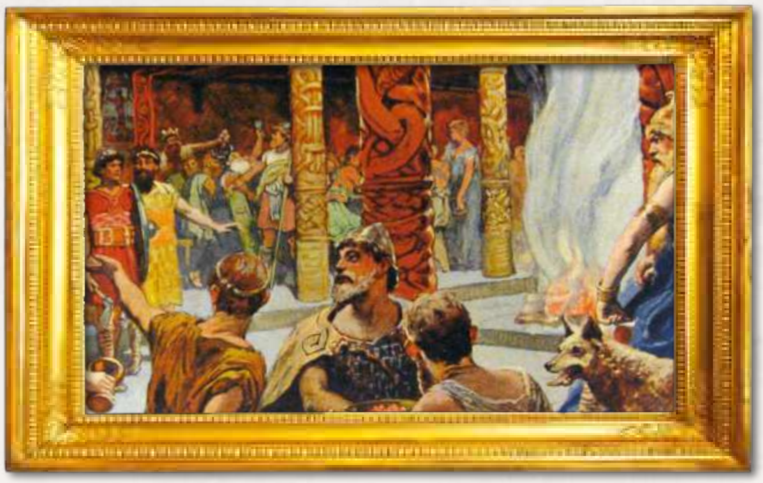
WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY

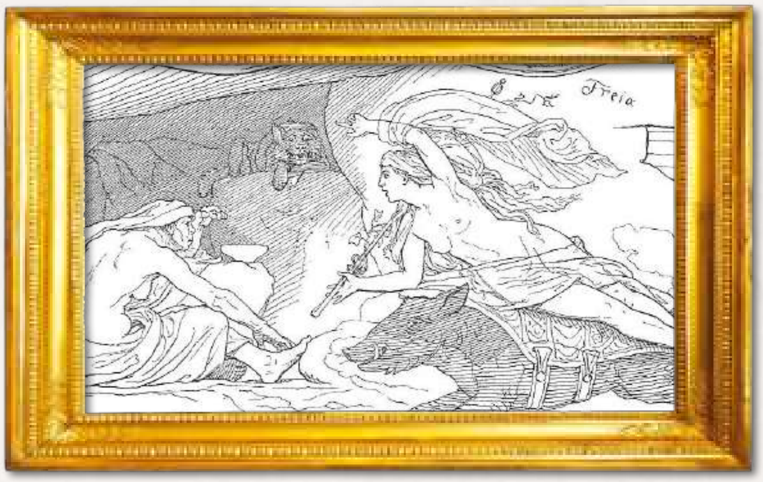
Odin is most well-known for being one of the primary gods of the Norse pantheon: the ruler of the Æsir gods. He is the husband of Frigg, and the father of many children including Thor and Baldr. Also known as Wodan, Woden, or Wotan in some regions, with a long history of being worshipped by the Germanic peoples, Wednesday is said to bear his name. Most of what we know about him comes from 13th century texts written in Old Norse, mostly originating from Iceland.

While most view him as a force for good, he does have a dark side, and this makes him one of the most complex gods worshipped by the Vikings. He is both a god of magic, wisdom and healing, but also a god of death. He is a noble ruler, yet also a trickster. It's said that he is the ruler of Valhalla - the Hall of the Slain - which exists in Asgard, the home of the gods. Half of those who die in battle are led here by the valkyries, while the other half go to Fólkvangr, ruled by Freyja. While two ravens are his most famous companions, Odin also has two wolves - Geri and Freki - along with Sleipnir, a horse with eight legs.

Odin is said to rule wisdom and knowledge, hence is master of both poetry and the runes. His quest for wisdom knows no bounds, and for this he faces the greatest of sacrifices. With the epithet 'the one-eyed', Odin is famous for sacrificing his eye to gain wisdom from drinking the waters of Mímisbrunnr - Mímir's well - which lies beneath Ygddrasil, the world tree. The poem *Hávamál* tells how Odin gained the wisdom of the runes through a great sacrifice: he hung himself upon the branches of the world tree for nine whole nights and was wounded with a spear, eating and drinking nothing, before the wisdom of the runes came to him.

Odin appears at the very beginning of Norse mythology, when the world was created from the body of the giant Ymir. He, along with his brothers Vili and Vé, killed Ymir, thus ending the rule of the giants and bringing on the dawn of the new gods: the Æsir. He is also closely associated with Ragnarök, the end times, in that the warriors who go to his hall are in constant preparation for this war. Odin will lead them into battle before being swallowed alive by the great wolf, Fenrir.





FREYJA: GODDESS OF LOVE

FREYJA, ALONG WITH APHRODITE, IS ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN GODDESSES OF LOVE, BUT JUST HOW JUSTIFIED IS HER REPUTATION?

WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY

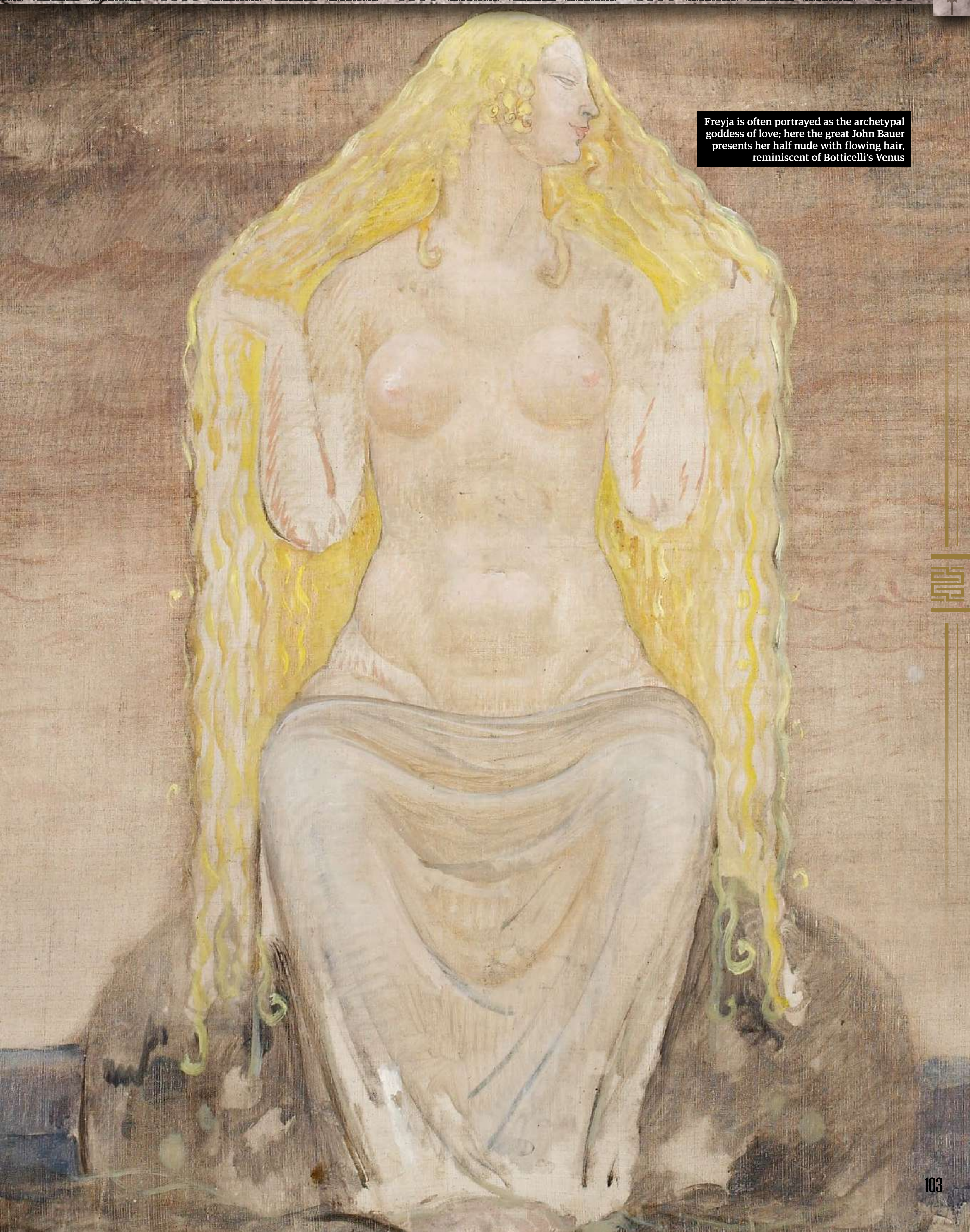
Freyja is indeed one of the leading ladies when it comes to goddesses associated with love, but she is also credited with ruling fertility. More surprising, however, is that she is also the goddess of war and death, taking half of the warriors killed in battle to Fólkvangr (the 'field of the host'), while Odin takes the other half to Valhalla. Within her realm is a large and beautiful hall, Sessrumnir ('filled with many seats'). She also makes a place in her realm for any woman suffering a noble death.

Most of what we know about Freyja comes from 13th century texts. Daughter of the sea god, Njord, and sister of Freyr, Freyja originally belonged to the Vanir tribe of gods. After the battle between the two warring factions of gods, Freyja became an honorary member of the Æsir gods. Many believe that Freyja and the goddess Frigg originate in the very same figure, while others dispute the claims. She is a goddess who goes by many names, particularly while searching the world for her husband, Óðr, for whom she wept red gold tears. Famously, her chariot is pulled by cats, and she owns a cloak of falcon feathers.

One myth stands above all others in Freyja's story: that of Gullveig, whom many believe to be Freyja herself. This figure is burnt three times, yet resurrected each time, which many scholars say led to the Æsir-Vanir war.

The gleaming torc Brísingamen is an item that recurs through tales about Freyja. In one, Thor's hammer is stolen by Þrymr, king of the giants, in order to barter for Freyja as his wife. When Freyja learns of his intentions, her anger is so great that the halls of the gods shake fiercely, and the necklace breaks and falls from her neck. To foil Þrymr, Thor dresses up as Freyja to pose as the new bride, wearing the famous necklace. Þrymr is horrified by his bride's greedy appetite, and taken aback by her fierce eyes, yet at the end of the farce Thor does retrieve his prized hammer. In another event, Loki steals the necklace, transforming into a seal to escape. Yet the god Heimdallr commits to battling him, after his own transformation into seal form, winning back the necklace for the goddess.

Freyja is very much linked to the art of seiðr, a form of shamanic Norse magic most often performed by women, involving divination, sorcery and visionary soul journeying. Originally a Vanir art, Freyja is said to have taught the Æsir this particular form of magic when she joined their ranks after the war.



Freyja is often portrayed as the archetypal goddess of love; here the great John Bauer presents her half nude with flowing hair, reminiscent of Botticelli's Venus

THOR: THE THUNDER GOD

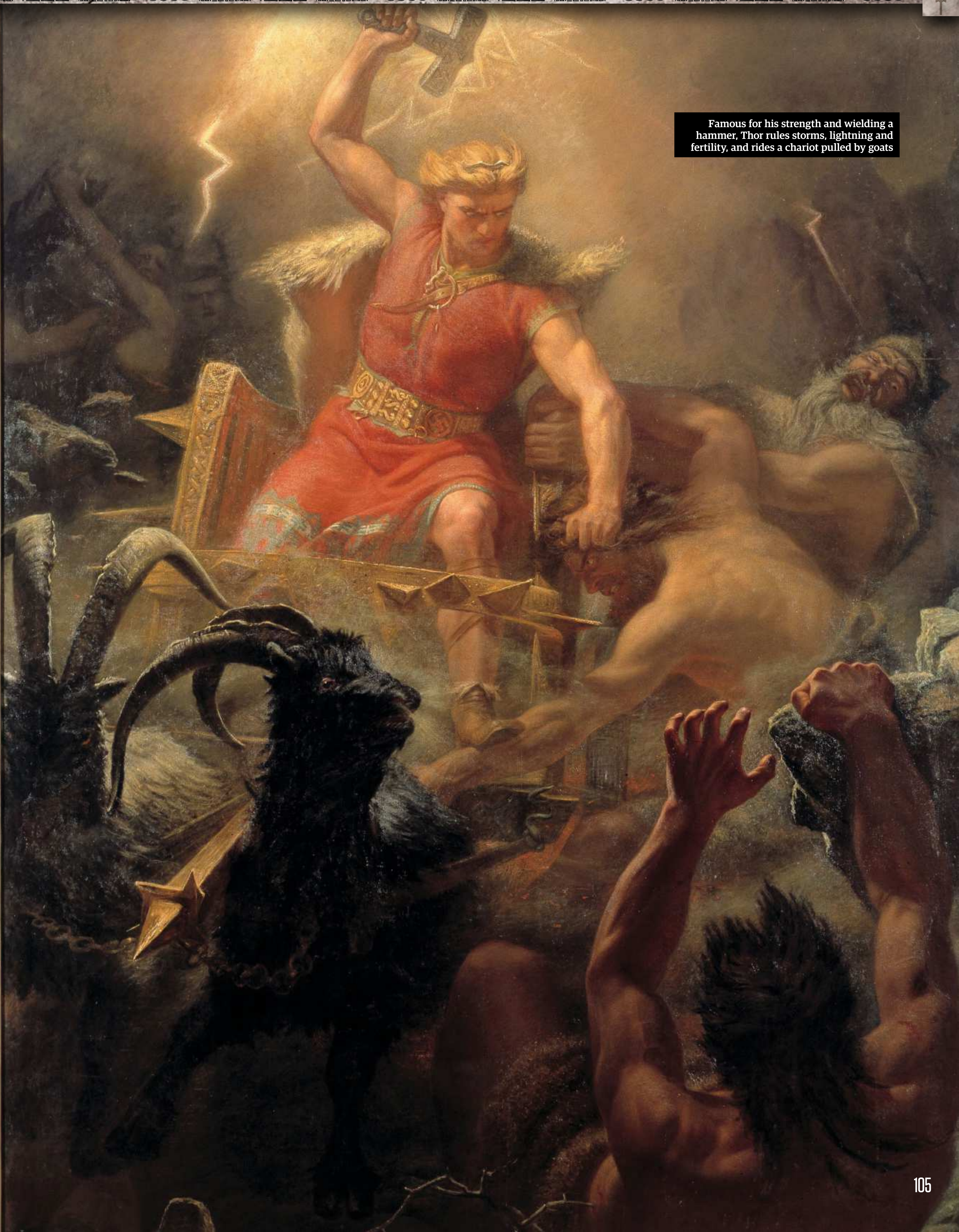
ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT GODS OF THE NORSE PANTHEON, THOR IS A WARRIOR GOD WHO WAS SO POWERFUL HE WAS MASTER OF THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY

Often thought of as the 'mightiest' of all the gods, Thor is the most famous of Odin's children. A god himself, he is husband to the goddess Sif, yet lover of a giantess named Járnsaxa, and has sired a number of children. First mentioned by the Romans as a Germanic god, Thor is Thursday's namesake, and usually depicted as large, red-haired, red-bearded and incredibly muscular! He is most often considered a god of thunder, lightning, storms and the sky in general, as well as warriors, and - strangely - fertility; it's said that sacrifices were often offered up to him in times of famine and even plague. An archetypal warrior, Thor is a force that battles chaos, valiantly defending the Æsir gods from the giants, or jötnar, their notorious ancient enemies.

Thor's most famous magical possession is his hammer, Mjölnir, which is said to be able to flatten any mountain. The story of its creation tells that its handle is unfortunately short, because a fly bit the smith's eyelid during its creation. The fly was said to be Loki in disguise. The god is also clad in the Megingjörð, a belt of power that doubles his strength, and Járngreipr, iron gloves needed to help him handle his mysterious hammer. Thor has two goats as his animal companions, Tanngrisnir (Teeth-bearer) and Tanngnjóstr (Teeth-grinder), which pull his chariot. Of course, these goats are magical. Each night the god feasts upon their flesh, yet - bones untouched - they are resurrected overnight for the next day's meal. This system of feasting works well, that is until Thor generously shares his food with a family of farmers. The son mistakenly breaks one of the leg bones to sample the marrow. The next day, the goats are revived as always, yet this time one remains lame.

One of the most dramatic scenes from Old Norse myth is the telling of the death of Thor by a witch, or völva. It is foretold that the god will battle the great Jörmungandr, the world serpent, at Ragnarök. While Thor will manage to kill the beast, he will then be able to take just nine steps afterwards, until he succumbs to its poisonous venom, and falls down in his own death-slumber. The world will then be submerged in blackness as the stars blink out, fires submerge the Earth in destruction, and the waves rise to flood it, before the land arises reborn for the dawn of a new age.

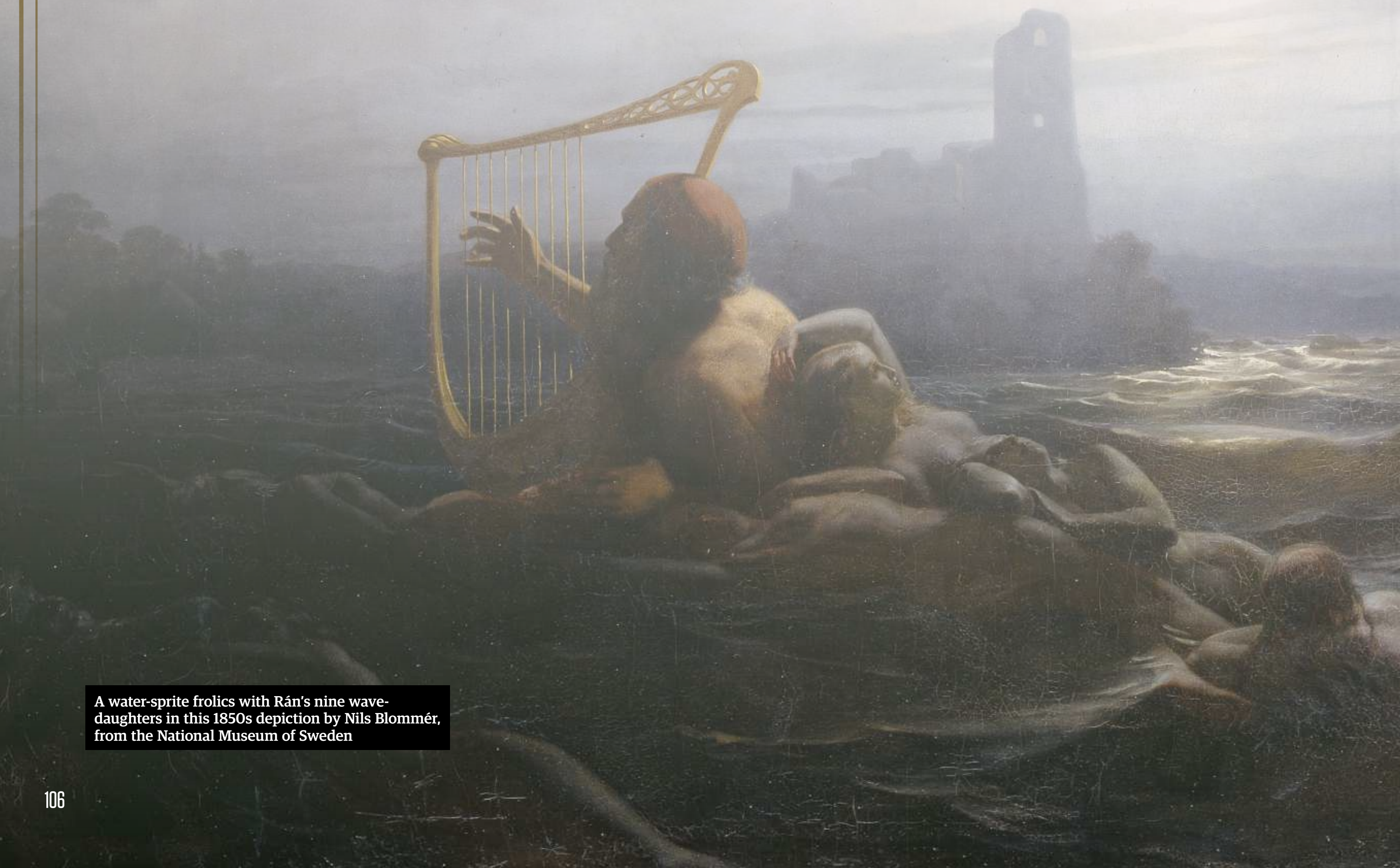


Famous for his strength and wielding a hammer, Thor rules storms, lightning and fertility, and rides a chariot pulled by goats

RÁN: GODDESS OF THE SEA

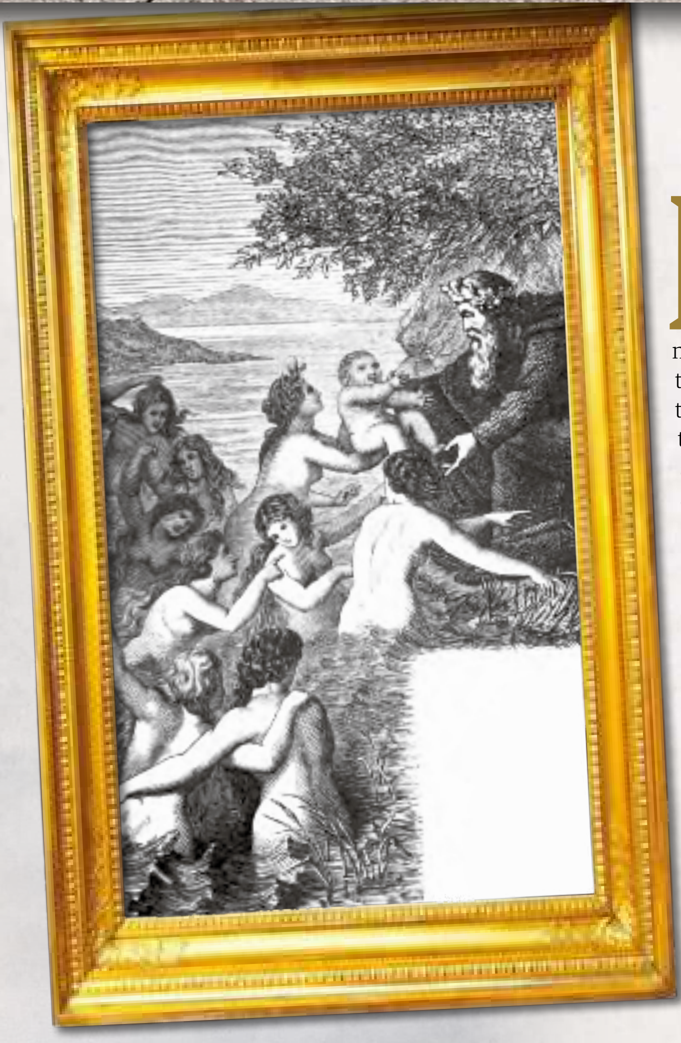
WHETHER A PURE PERSONIFICATION, OR AN ACTUAL SEA GODDESS, RÁN IS A DANGER TO ANYONE WHO BRAVES THE OCEAN WAVES…

WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY



A water-sprite frolics with Rán's nine wave-daughters in this 1850s depiction by Nils Blommér, from the National Museum of Sweden

RAN: GODDESS OF THE SEA

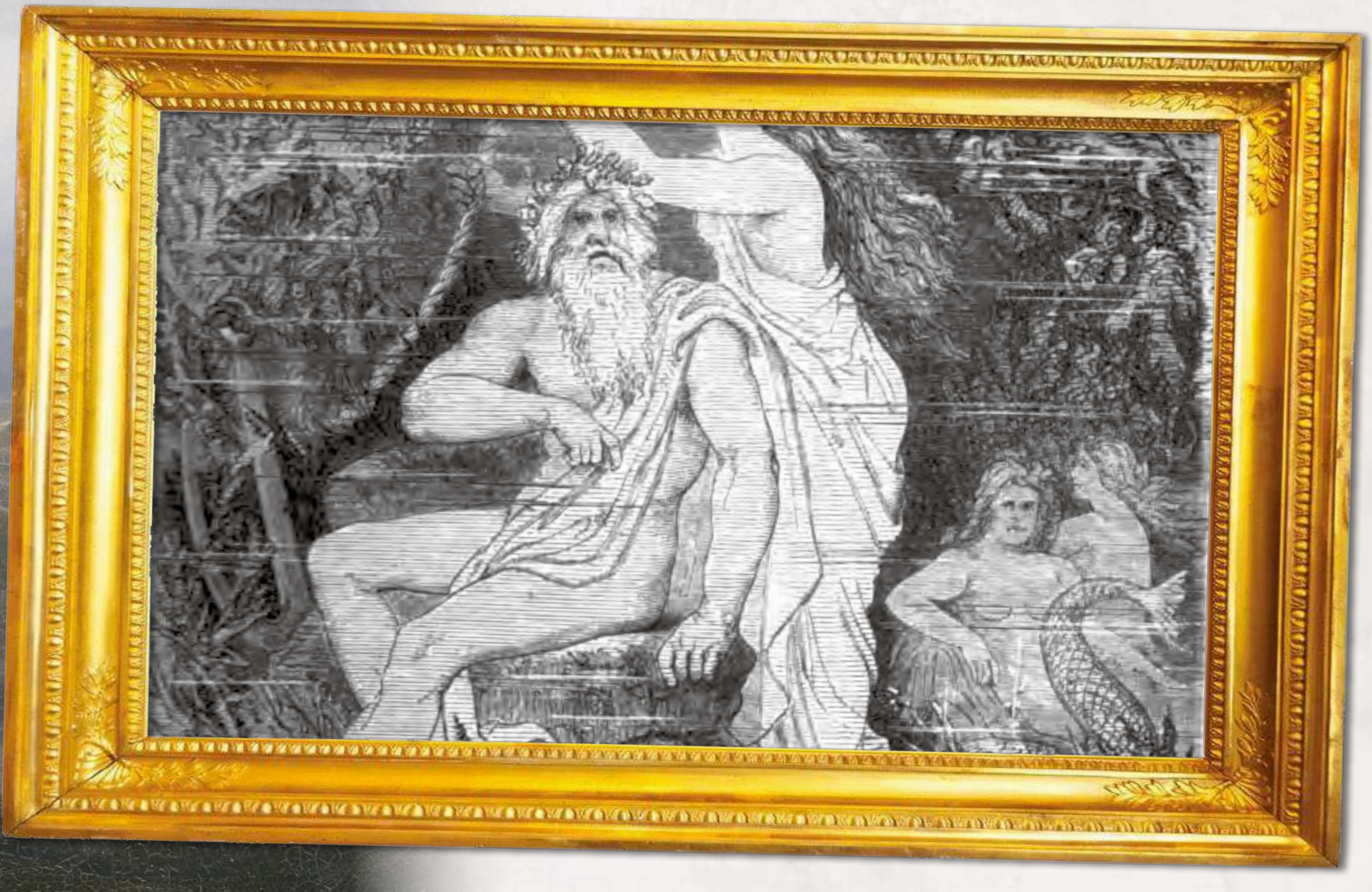


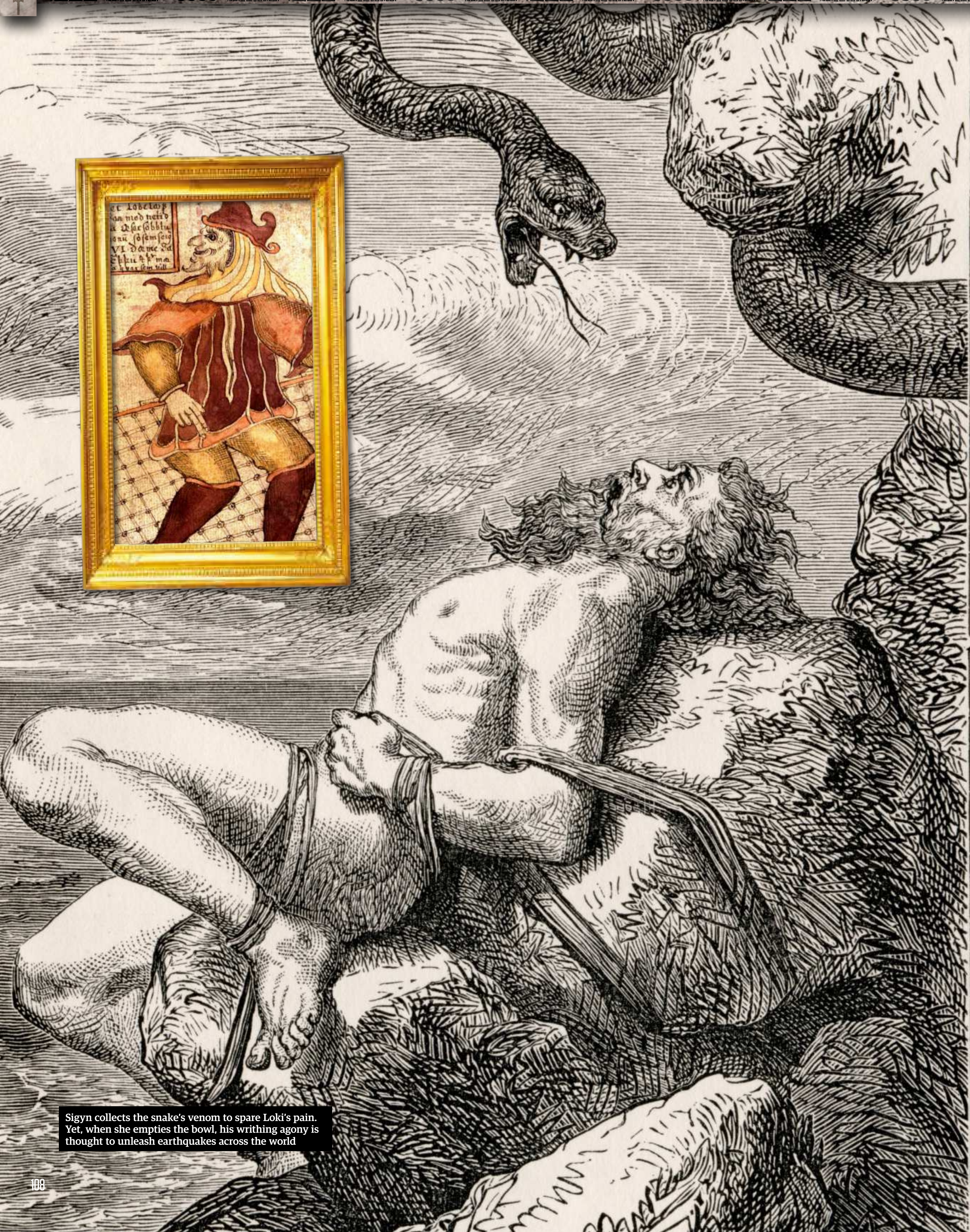
Like the primordial gods of the Greek pantheon, Rán is the personification of an ancient force: the sea itself, as well as a goddess in her own right. While sources mentioning the goddess are scarce, she is thought to be a giantess. She is married to a sea giant, Ægir, meaning 'Ocean', and the pair live in a great hall beneath the sea. While Ægir is reminiscent of the sheer almighty power of the sea, and the bounty it can provide, Rán – as females often are in mythology – conjures the sinister, brooding aspects of the depths: drowning, desolation and death. Indeed, her name is linked to the word 'robber'.

The goddess' name appears in many Old Norse kennings (metaphors) for the sea, with death being likened to 'resting in Rán's bed' in *Frithiof's Saga*. In the *Prose Edda*, Rán is described as a 'spray-cold spæ-wife', conjuring images of a chilling witch who can see into men's futures and predict their fate. However, Rán and Ægir are notorious for hosting marvellous feasts and celebrations, and are well-liked by the Norse gods, who frequently join them.

The couple have nine daughters, each of whom is a personification of the waves themselves, and are the mothers of the god Heimdallr. Each of the daughters' names refers to a type of wave: from Dröfn, meaning 'foamy sea', to Blóðughadda, 'bloody hair', referring to the reddish hue that sometimes appears on the foaming sea.

Rán is most usually depicted under the waves, bearing a great net, which she throws to the surface, catching wayward seafarers and dragging them into the depths to face their fate. This is the same net borrowed by the god Loki, with which he caught the dwarf Andvari at his waterfall, while he was in the form of a pike fish. We can imagine that such a goddess was used to explain drowning at sea, which must have been common for the Norse – a seafaring society who relied on the oceans for sustenance and livelihood. Indeed, the infamous Icelandic poet and protagonist of *Egil's Saga*, Egill Skallagrímsson himself, lost his own son to drowning in the 10th century, blaming the goddess for his loss. Rán and Ægir's hall below the sea is said to be yet another afterlife destination for a portion of the dead; this time only those allotted by drowning will be delivered to this resting place for eternity.





Sigyn collects the snake's venom to spare Loki's pain. Yet, when she empties the bowl, his writhing agony is thought to unleash earthquakes across the world

LOKI: THE TRICKSTER

SHROUDED IN MYSTERY, LOKI IS BOTH GOD AND GIANT, TRAGIC FIGURE AND TRICKSTER. BUT WHAT ROLE DOES HE REALLY PLAY?

WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY

Loki is a god, yet also an individual who stands very much apart from the rest of the pantheon. Rootlessly moving between many groups, he is a trickster - a shape-shifter, and gender-switcher - who creates his own rules and morality throughout the Norse myths. First attested to in the *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas* of the 13th century, he is a character that is difficult to pin down.

With questionable parentage, Loki is husband to the goddess Sigyn, yet he is the father of many children; the most famous are those he sired with the giantess Angrboða. These three grew up in Jötunheimr, the realm of the giants. The gods convened to decide the fate of the hellish offspring, decreeing that no good could come of them, as they were prophesied to cause both mischief and disaster. They were cast away: Jörmungandr into the lake surrounding the Midgard, Hel to have dominion over the nine worlds and rule over the underworld realm, while Fenrir the wolf was raised by the gods themselves, yet bound when he grew at an alarming rate. Strangely - in a tale proving gender fluidity is as old as human myth - Loki is also the mother of Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse, when he takes the form of a mare to trick a giant's steed and gives birth to the resulting foal himself.

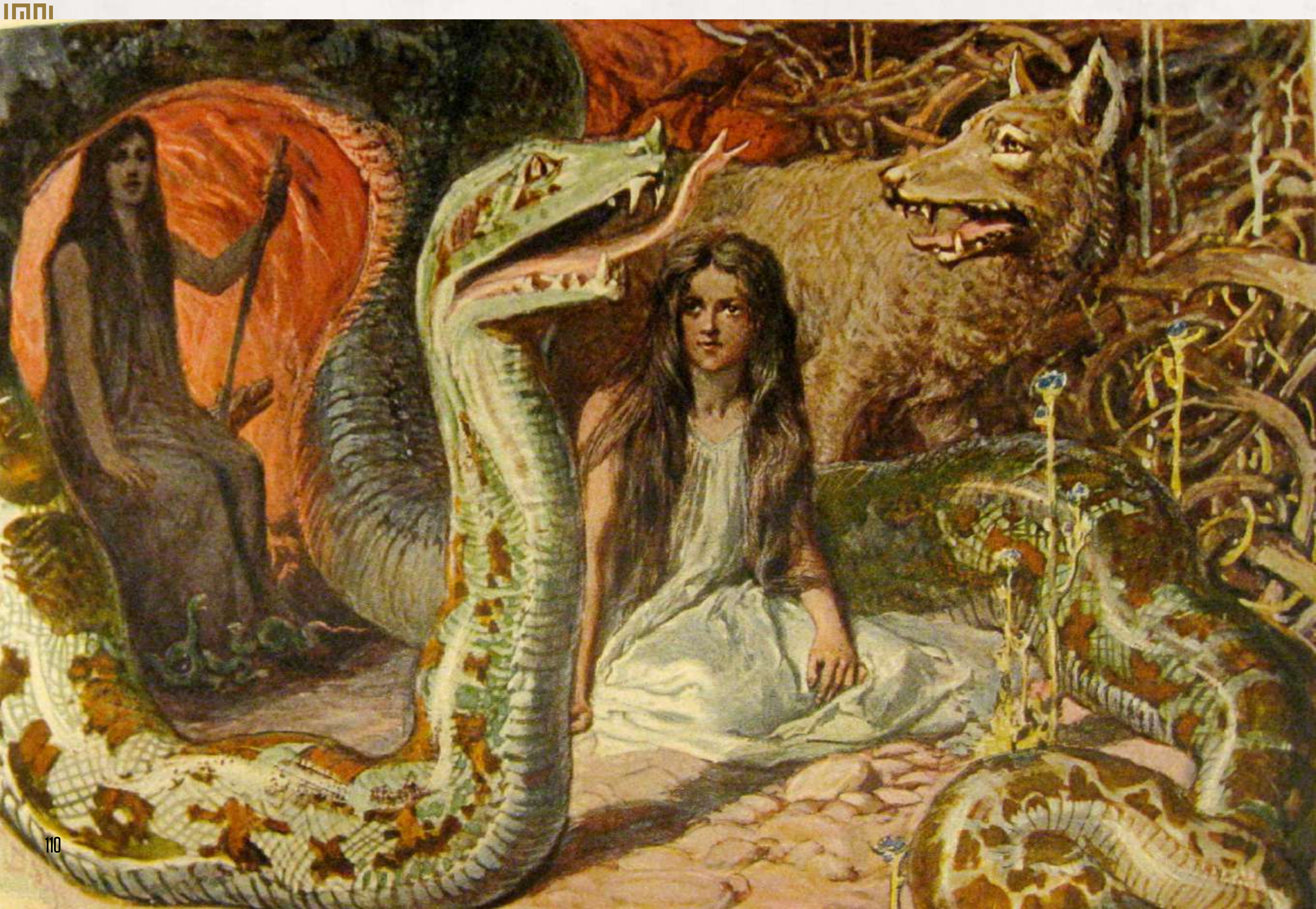
While a tragic figure who inspires pity, some of Loki's deeds seem inexcusable. At one point he kills Ótr the dwarf, while Ótr is in the form of an otter. He then says nothing while the gods Odin and Hœnir unknowingly make a bag from the dwarf's otter skin, to later show it to the slain man's very own father.

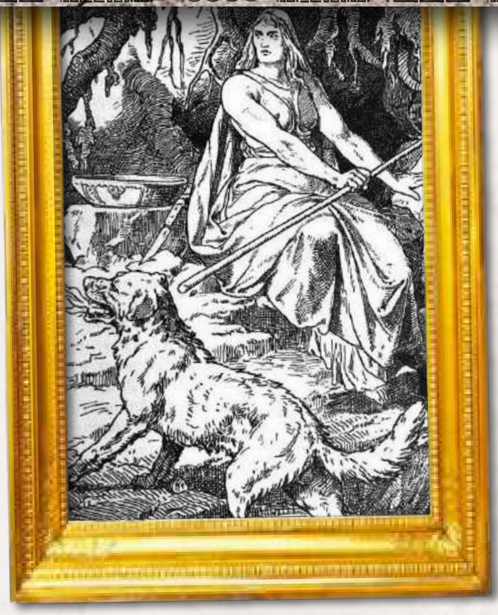
What is undeniable is that Loki is both help and hindrance to the gods, and plays a central role in the death of Baldr, in that he disguises himself as a giantess and refuses to weep - the condition for Hel to release the god back to life. For this crime, the gods demand retribution. The villain is bound to a rock with the entrails of his own son, while Skaði, the winter goddess, sets a venomous snake above his head, which drips its poison painfully on to writhing Loki. Only when the end-times come will Loki free himself, to fight against the gods once more in their final battle. It is during Ragnarök that Loki and the god Heimdallr will finally confront each other, both succumbing to death by the other's hand.

HEL: GODDESS OF DEATH

THE IMAGE OF HEL SITTING ON HER THRONE, RULING OVER THE UNDERWORLD, HAS CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF MANY

WRITTEN BY: DEE DEE CHAINEY



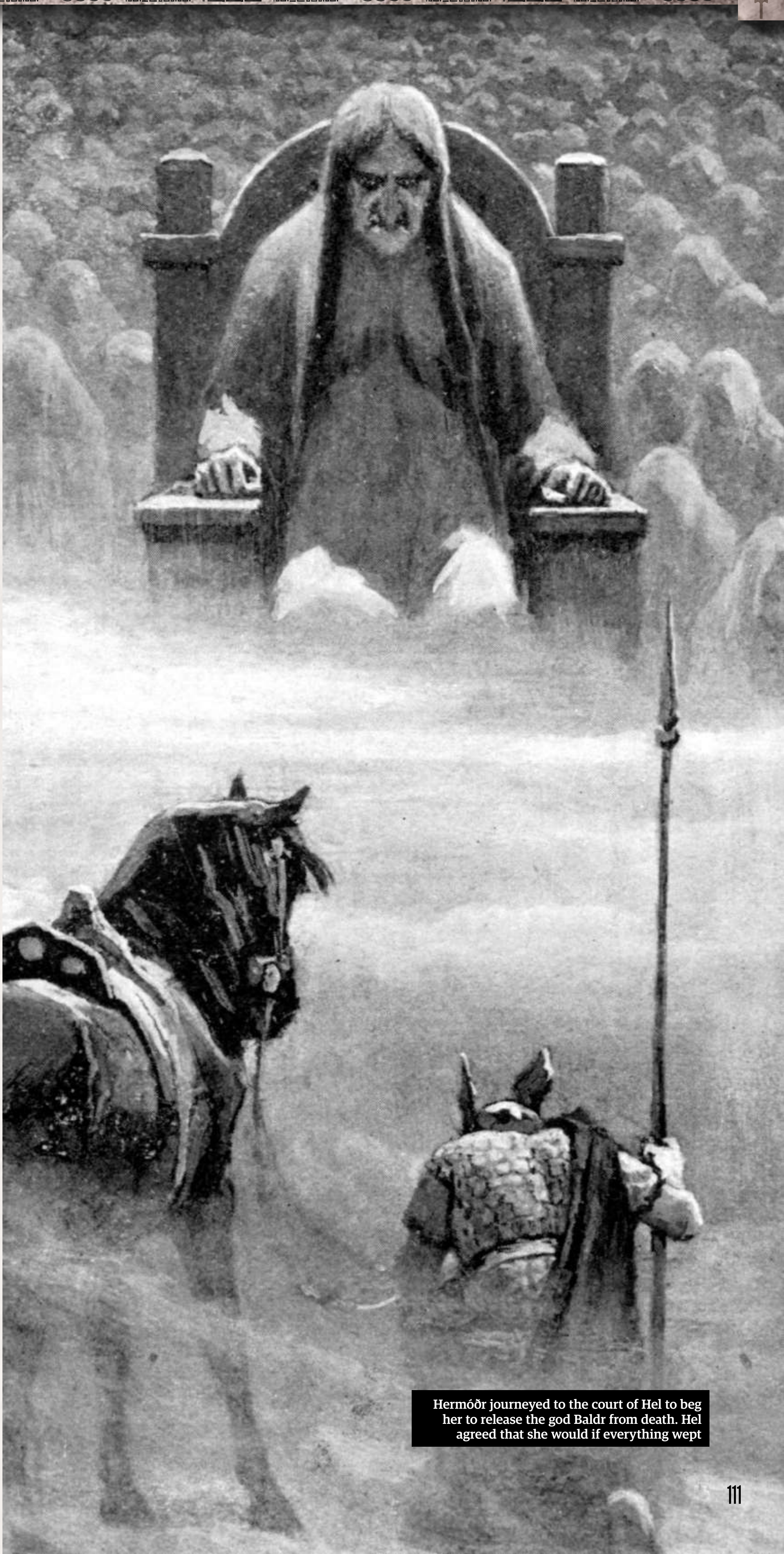


One of the murkiest and most mysterious of Norse figures, Hel is thought by many to be a goddess of death, or a nefarious being by others, yet it's undisputed that the underworld is her domain. Mentions of this shadowy figure date back as far as the 9th and 10th centuries in Icelandic texts. Fierce and downcast, she is said to be half blue-black and half flesh-coloured – which, some claim, alludes to her decaying, necrotic flesh.

She is one of the three cursed children of Loki and the giantess Angrboða, along with the wolf Fenrir, and the world serpent Jörmungandr. When banished by Odin for fear of predictions about the havoc she and her siblings could wreak, Hel was sent to Niflheim, the underworld realm of mist, to the Halls of Hel underneath the roots of Yggdrasil the world tree. Here she was given authority over the nine worlds, and receives an allotted number of the dead – namely those who die of illness and age, to whom she must offer sustenance and a place to rest for eternity. The realm of Hel is described as a grand but grim place, with great gates, high walls, and many mansions. Here, she sits on her throne, staff in hand, with her hellish hound, Garm.

One of the most important myths of the Norse cycle is that of the death of Baldr, in which Hel plays an important role. The fatally wounded god saw a vision of a goddess of death – who many equate with Hel – rise up three days before his death, predicting his end. With this his fate was sealed. Soon Baldr entered the gates of her realm for eternity. Yet, the other gods were so distressed, Frigg asked if anyone among their number would venture into the underworld, and bargain with Hel herself for Baldr's return. Hermóðr, Baldr's own brother, took the task, riding to Hel on Odin's eight-legged horse. Hel makes a bargain: if every living creature will shed tears for Baldr's death, she will return him to his people. Loki, of course, intervenes; the giantess Þökk refuses to cry for Baldr, sealing his fate. Many people believe this was, in fact, Loki in one of his many disguises.

While few concrete references to the goddess exist, some argue that Hel herself is merely a later personification of the realm. Whichever the case, there is no doubt that this goddess is one that haunts the imaginations of many even to this day.



Hermóðr journeyed to the court of Hel to beg her to release the god Baldr from death. Hel agreed that she would if everything wept

ANGLO-SAXON PAGANISM

POLYTHEISM IN BRITAIN FLOURISHED AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF ROMAN FORCES – THE GODS THAT CAME WITH SAXON INVADERS RESHAPED BRITAIN FOREVER

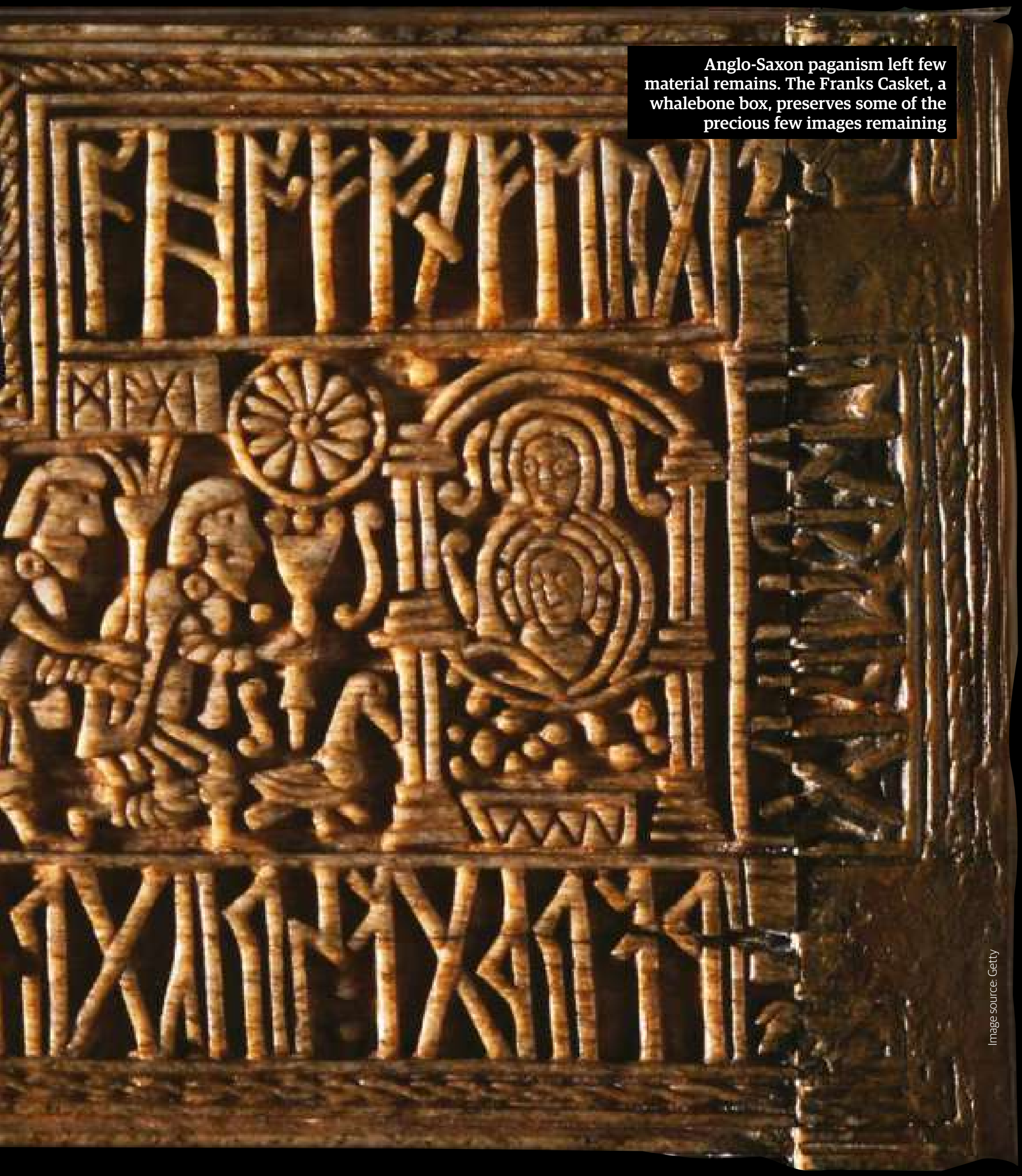
WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR

When the Romans withdrew their forces from Britain around 410 CE the people they left behind were left in both a tricky military situation and a confused religious state. The Roman Empire was officially a Christian one, yet outside of cities and the elite many British people clung to their paganism. Even Christians referenced older pagan traditions. A mosaic from Hinton St Mary depicts both Jesus and a range of mythical Greek figures. This mixture of faiths was not to last however - the Anglo-Saxons were coming, and bringing their own religion.

In the power vacuum left by the Romans, bands of warriors from Northern Europe came to Britain. The monk Gildas described in his *Ruin of Britain* how the "impious and fierce" Saxons were invited to protect the southern parts of Britain from the wild attacks of northern tribes. He thought this invitation was like welcoming "wolves into the sheep-fold." As a Christian Gildas saw the Saxons not just as a threat to British sovereignty but as enemies of his god. For the next 300 years the dominant religion in Britain was what today we'd call Anglo-Saxon paganism.

No British person at this time would have called themselves 'pagan'. It was a derogatory term applied to them by Christian writers but has been used ever since to describe their religion. Without a central figure of religious authority Anglo-Saxon paganism was more akin to the folk practices of the Celtic paganism from which it evolved, in that many local variants formed across tribal and national boundaries. While the continental invaders brought their own beliefs it seems likely that in Britain their religion merged with the existing paganism of the people to create a novel Anglo-Saxon paganism.

Traces of Anglo-Saxon religious thought and theology can be found in the English names of the days of the week



Anglo-Saxon paganism left few material remains. The Franks Casket, a whalebone box, preserves some of the precious few images remaining

Image source Getty

Unfortunately the Anglo-Saxons themselves have left us no written account of their religion. All the evidence we have comes from later sources after the arrival of Christian missionaries.

Much of the evidence for Anglo-Saxon deities comes from the names they have left embedded in the British landscape. The god Woden still speaks to us from places like Wednesfield and Woodnesborough.

Anglo-Saxon paganism must be reconstructed from the fragments scattered across many different texts and locations around England.

For Anglo-Saxons the world was controlled by fate. Wyrd, as the Anglo-Saxons called it, is the force that moves everything under heaven. As the poem *Beowulf* says "Wyrd [fate] goes ever as it must." There was no use struggling with it and it is impossible to separate wyrd from our lives. Every aspect of our destiny is inherent in everything we do. This fatalist view of existence points to Anglo-Saxon paganism as being a religion of this world. It may do us good to invoke the gods, but only if we were fated to invoke the gods in the first place.

Those gods we might call on were many. Anglo-Saxon paganism was polytheistic and included many deities that seem familiar to those who have studied Norse and Germanic paganism. The chief god of the Anglo-Saxons was Woden, who bears more than a passing resemblance to the Norse Odin. Woden was a god of war but also wisdom. His skill with runes associated Woden with magic.

Runes were not used for writing long prose texts but usually for short inscriptions either in commemoration of someone or in calling for supernatural aid. The monk Bede, a famous historian, mentions how when a man called Imma was captured by enemies he kept escaping. The captors suspected Imma was using 'loosening words', likely runic inscriptions, to slip his shackles. Bede, of course, assures us that it was saying Christian mass that freed his bound hands. Anglo-Saxons believed in the power of words.

Tiw was the god of war that Anglo-Saxons called on for victory in battle. To the bellicose kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain his skill at arms was a prized one. Thunor was the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse Thor. Thunor was the protector of the common man and humanity as a whole. With his hammer he kept the giants at bay. His hammer symbol was particularly popular on goods left in burials.

Anglo-Saxon graves are a major source of our knowledge of their beliefs on the afterlife. The body of the dead seems to have been of little importance to survival in the afterlife. While most people were buried there was also a tradition of cremation. The burned remains would be placed in a pottery urn, sometimes decorated with the swastika of Thunor or the runic symbol of Tiw.

Those bodies buried whole were often accompanied by grave goods, which might have been meant to accompany the deceased into the next life. Men, and even boys, were given weapons while women were interred with household objects and jewellery. We may never know exactly what the actions Anglo-Saxons performed for the dead represented however; some of them do not have obvious meanings. Decapitations were common on the dead and the head might be placed in many positions in relation to the body, the meaning of which is uncertain.

The living Anglo-Saxon worshipped the gods in a variety of locations. Sacred groves perhaps stretching back to the time of the Celts may have been preserved into the Anglo-Saxon period. 'Hearg' in Old English meant a holy grove or shrine. Places with the word 'harrow' in them often derived from such places. Weohs by contrast were smaller shrines found by roadsides. No archaeological evidence for human constructed sites of worship has been found but there are

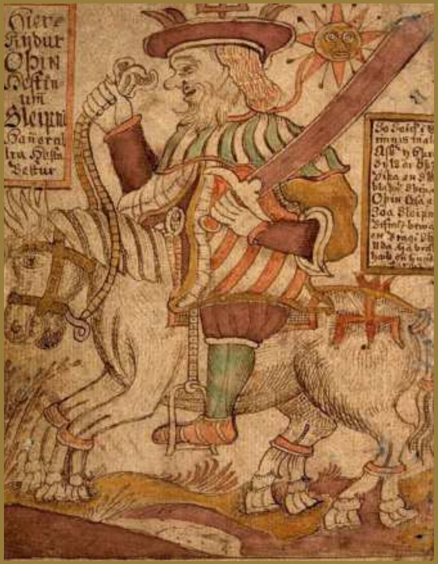
LACNUNGA: BOOK OF SPELLS

The *Lacnunga* is a collection of Anglo-Saxon medical texts and charms that gives us a glimpse at how the Anglo-Saxons may have used their faith to heal themselves. Many of the cures offered in the *Lacnunga* are simply various mixtures of plant and animal bits that may do some good if nothing better is on offer. Yet several charms call on powers beyond the mere ingredients of the medicine, and one remedy has even been proven to kill the antibiotic-resistant MRSA bacteria.

One gives examples of rituals to be done by mothers in various situations. A mother who cannot nurse her infant must step three times over a dead person's grave. If that does not work she must take a sip of cow's milk and spit it in running water and then take a drink from the stream.

In the 'Nine Herbs Charm', Woden the god is specifically named. In the poem, nine plants including mugwort, thyme, and fennel are mentioned as being particularly efficacious against wounds becoming infected, and it is Woden who is credited with creating these plants.

"A snake came crawling, it bit a man
Then Woden took nine glory-twigs,
Smote the serpent so that it flew into nine parts."



The gods could offer more than supernatural support. Odin placed herbs in nature and taught humans how to create medicines

> “THE LANDSCAPE ITSELF MIGHT HAVE BEEN ALIVE IN SOME SENSE TO THE PEOPLE OF THIS PERIOD”

Images and descriptions of drinking suggest that such gatherings had ritual meanings and fostered community and bonds of loyalty

Image source: Berig

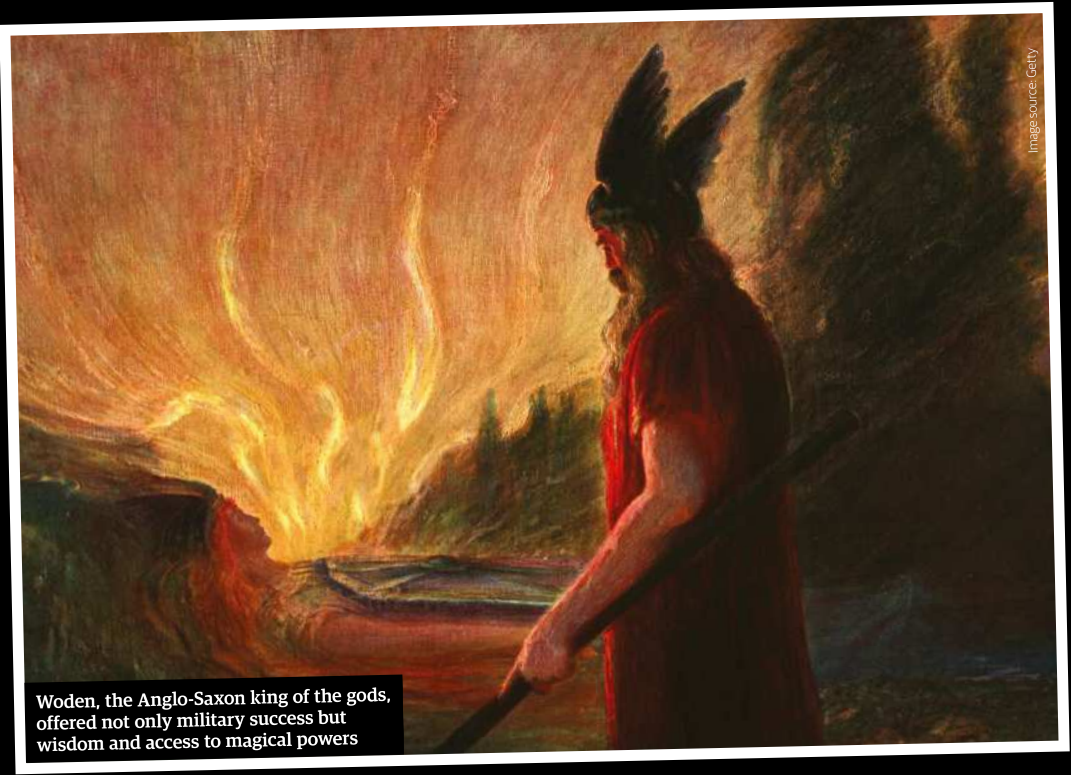


Image source: Getty

Woden, the Anglo-Saxon king of the gods, offered not only military success but wisdom and access to magical powers

The legendary brothers Hengist and Horsa were the mythical leaders of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded Britain and founded a line of kings

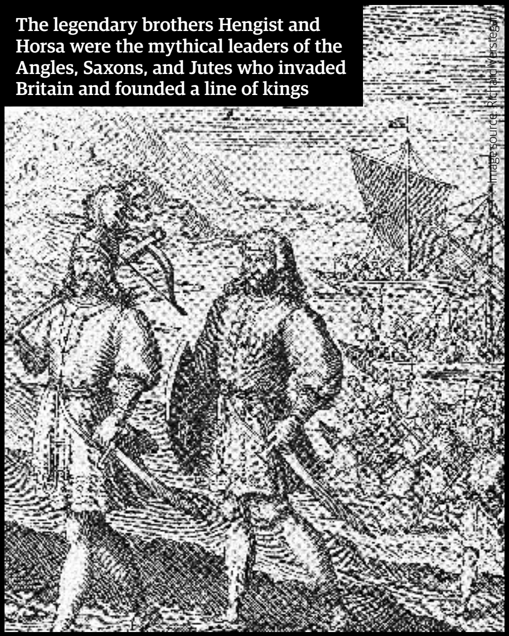


Image source: Richard Verstegan

references in later texts to them. In Pope Gregory's letter to Mellitus he says: "The idol temples of that race [the English] should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God."

As well as gods the Anglo-Saxon world was one inhabited by mighty heroes, strange other races like elves and dwarves, and threatening giants. The landscape itself might have been alive in some sense to the people of this period. Anglo-Saxon paganism may have incorporated animistic beliefs that spirits existed in various places, trees, and rocks. Offerings left in springs and woodlands could either be to the gods or to the spirits special to a single location.

> Farming was very important to Anglo-Saxon faith, which had specific spells and prayers for blessing and healing livestock and land

What occurred during Anglo-Saxon pagan worship is again an open question. Animal sacrifice seems to have been part of their ritual worship. Bede says that November was once known as Blod monath - Blood Month. "Blod-monath is the month of immolations, for it was in this month that the cattle which were to be slaughtered were dedicated to the gods". The modern English word 'Bless' is derived from the Old English 'Bletsian' meaning 'to consecrate with blood'. Like many early faiths Anglo-Saxon paganism may not have been as clean as modern religions, yet there was also joy in their practice.

Anglo-Saxon and Norse writings tell us of drinking rituals called symbel. Horns of mead or ale were raised and toasts made to those present in a chieftain's hall. Oaths of loyalty and friendship were spoken between those present and gifts given to guests. To ensure that a symbel did not descend into a drunken riot one person was appointed to keep it holy.

One of the events at a symbel was often the recitation of family lineages as a way of honouring both the living and the dead. In one list of royal ancestors Woden is given as the progenitor of the line. This was not an attempt to claim divine ancestry, but rather a later Christian attempt to cast the pagan gods of the Anglo-Saxons as merely humans of the deep past.

Christianity took some time to return to Britain. While some kings took to Christianity quickly, others hedged their bets. Bede records how King Rædwald of East Anglia kept a pagan idol in the same temple as a Christian altar. Many Christian kings lost their thrones to pagans, or were followed by pagan successors. Eventually though Christianity became the dominant faith of England.

Not all traces of Anglo-Saxon paganism could be exorcised from the country however. The days of the week that we use derive from the Anglo-Saxon names for them and their gods. Thursday is Thunor's day, Tuesday is Tiw's Day, and Wednesday still belongs to the most high god Woden.

In folklore the Anglo-Saxons have left their mark too. Wayland the Smith was a popular figure in Anglo-Saxon mythology. A famed maker of magical goods, he appears in several Old English poems, including *Beowulf* and his image is found carved in stones and the Franks Casket. At an ancient Neolithic barrow tomb dating from around 3,400 BCE known as Wayland's Smithy, local people in the 18th century believed an invisible spirit would shoe their horse if given an offering. Old faiths may linger long after the last believer has gone, it seems.

Image source: British Museum

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

UNCOVER THE GODS AND SPIRITS WHOSE WORSHIP TOOK PLACE IN THE PRIVACY OF THE HOME

WRITTEN BY: KATHARINE MARSH

Within Ancient Rome, not everyone was a genius - but everyone did have a genius watching over them. This wasn't their intellectual prowess looking out for them but a spirit that had only your best interests at heart. It would bless the head of the household, ensuring a fertile marital bed, so long as it was worshipped and celebrated, particularly on the husband and father's birthday, with flowers and incense.

Religion played a major part in the culture of ancient Rome. There were the 12 big gods and as more territory was conquered, the republic and empire became a melting pot of different cultures with new deities either standing on their own or adding colour to those that already existed in the Roman pantheon. But they were the gods that were worshipped outside in the temples that were built in public spaces all over Europe. In the privacy of the home, there were more, and this was where religion got personal.

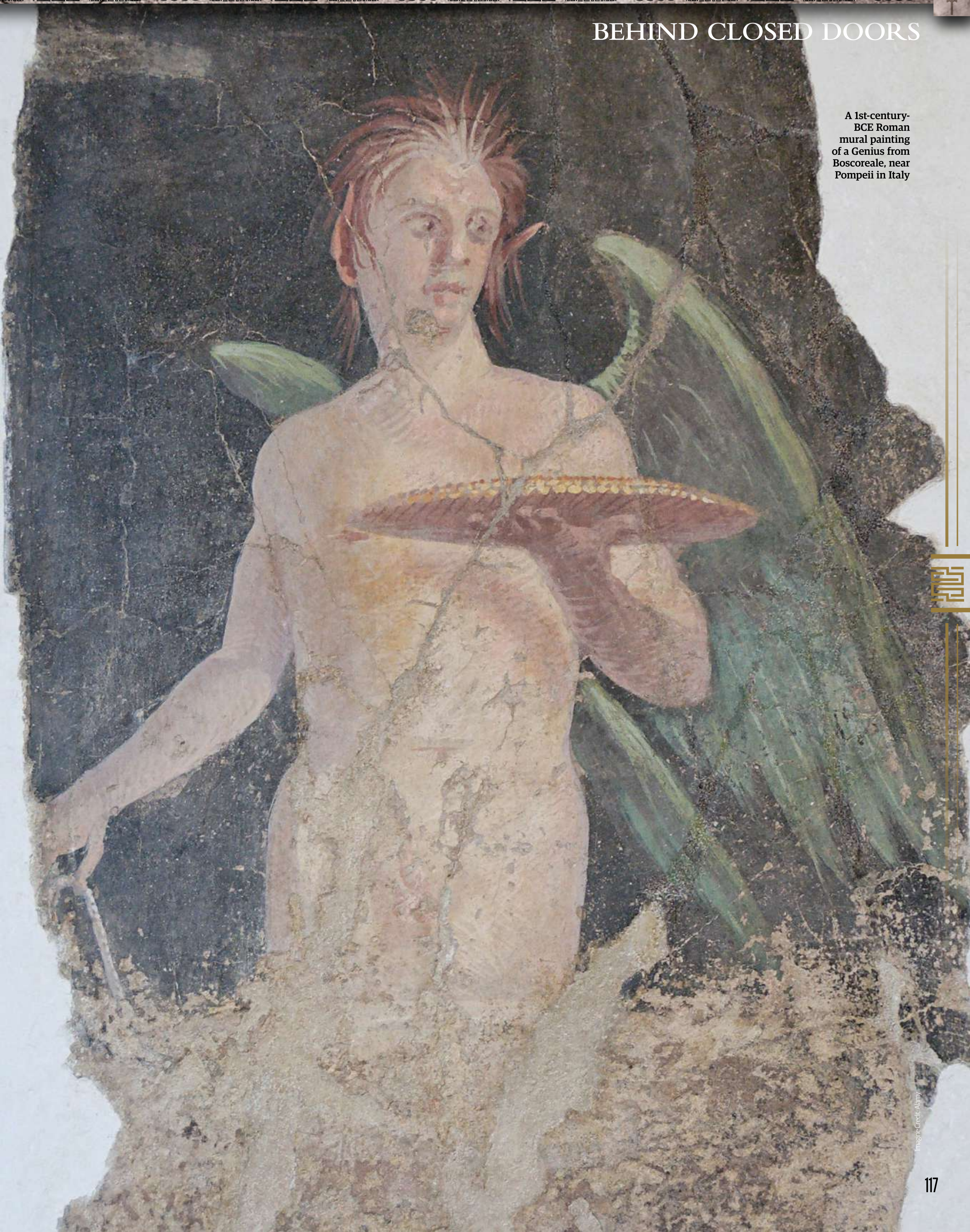
Situated in the atrium or near the kitchen of a Roman house was a shrine; it was important that it lay at the beating heart of the home. There stood votives and effigies of the household deities, which were usually divided into two groups: the Panes, or Penates, and the Lares.

The former were spirits of the pantry and kitchen who kept the house stocked with food and made a house, well, a home. During meals their statuettes would be placed on the dining table, and offerings were often made to them of parts of regular meals, cakes, wine, honey, incense and sometimes even a blood sacrifice. However, it is worth noting that there was public worship of the Penates, although these rituals focused on the state and nationalism rather than the household.

Lares were even more personal. The spirits of dead ancestors and closer family members, their job was to ensure that the living prospered. The importance of the Lares can't really be overstated - offerings and prayers were made every day, with more elaborate rites taking place on special days relating to the deceased such as birthdays and other anniversaries.

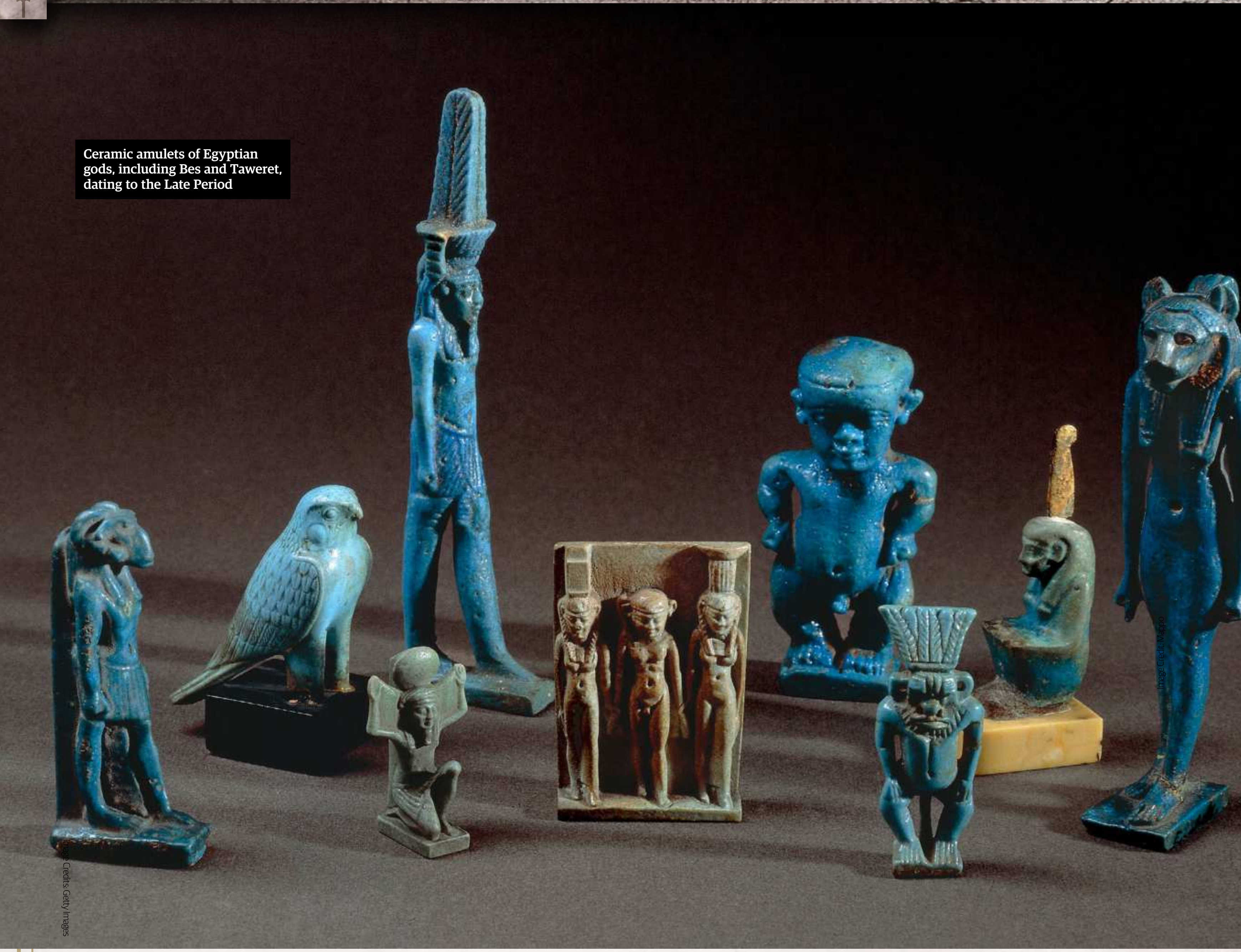
The Lares could be split into smaller subgroups, one of which was the Parentes. These spirits were of the immediate family - parents, children and siblings - who had died. Having said that, some made statuettes of living family members to take on long trips. A man travelling from Rome to Athens could take figures of his wife and children along with him, and it would be like they were accompanying him on the journey.

Lemures were a little trickier - they were unhappy spirits, often wrathful or just mischievous. Probably most comparable to a poltergeist today, they could be the result of inadequate prayers and offerings. Festivals were held in attempts to placate them like the Lemuria and the Feralia, and for three days a year the stones that blocked the gates to the Underworld were opened in Rome, leaving these sometimes vengeful spirits free to roam the city's streets. If you'd wronged a family member who had died, you were due for a good haunting; it was in your best interests to keep up



A 1st-century-BCE Roman mural painting of a Genius from Boscoreale, near Pompeii in Italy

Imagine Credit: Alamy



Ceramic amulets of Egyptian gods, including Bes and Taweret, dating to the Late Period

Image Credit: Mappo

Image Credits: Getty Images

> “OFFERINGS WERE MADE AT SHRINES TO BOTH THANK THE GODS AND APPEASE THEM”

the daily worship and ensure tombs were kept in top condition.

Whenever anyone died, they joined the Manes, the spirits of the dead; they would then become one or more of the different types of Lar. The Feralia festival, held each year on 21 February, would honour them, falling on the last day of the Parentalia festival, which was all about honouring family ancestors.

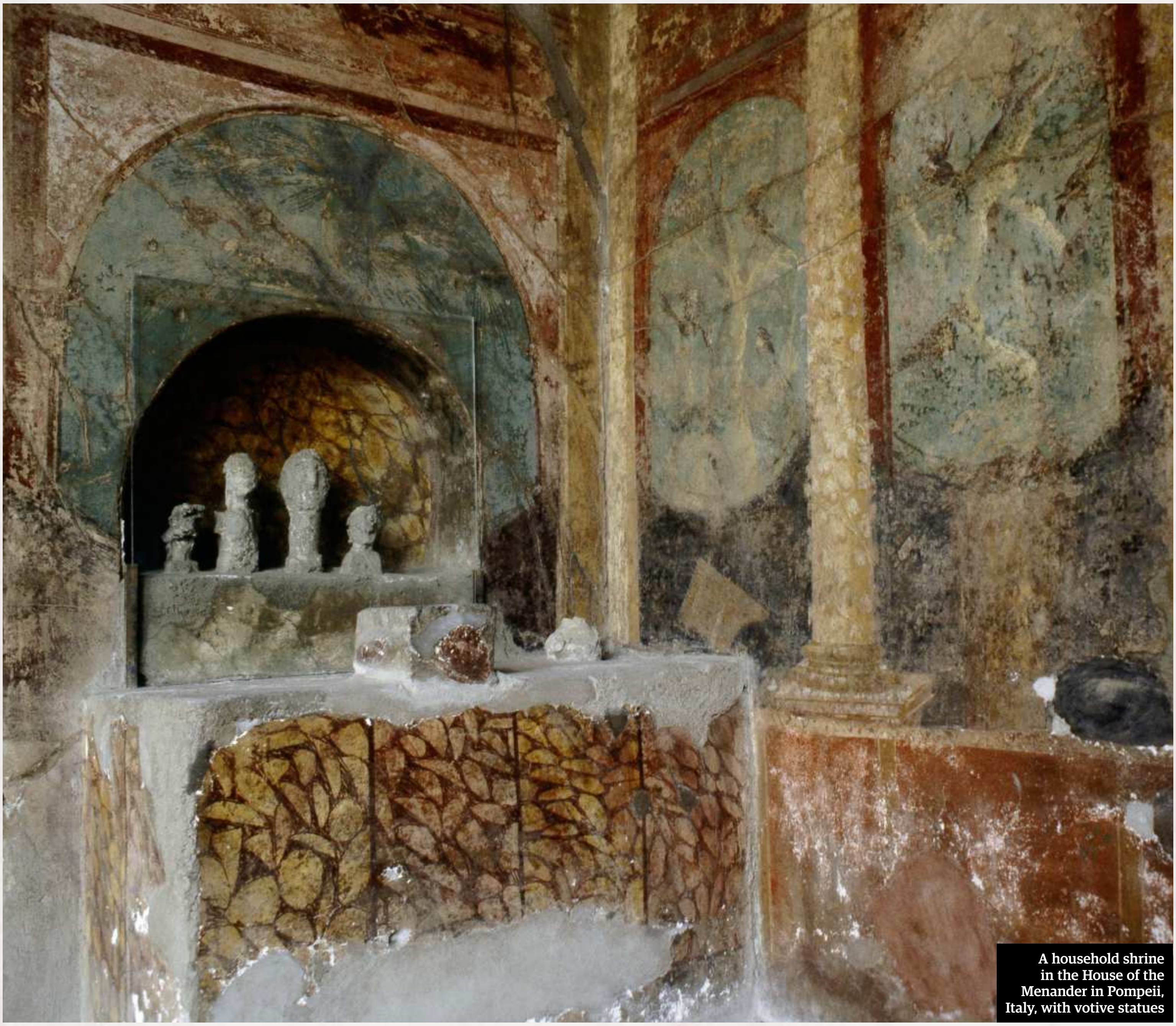
Of course, the Romans weren’t alone in honouring those who had passed over - the ancient Celts celebrated Samhain at the end of October and beginning of November with bonfires lit to confuse spirits that were considered to be harbingers of winter. And the Romans certainly weren’t alone in worshipping their departed ancestors as gods.

Ancient Greek mythology included the eudaemon, a good spirit, and its counterpart the cacodaemon. The former were supposed to be guardians, much like the Roman Genius, and they provided protection for those they watched over. Norse paganism also saw personal spirits or deities overlooking fate called fylgjur, often taking the shape of animals, while varðir were guardian spirits. Pre-Christian Lithuanian mythology had Gabija, the spirit of the fire that protected the home and family. While these can’t always be strictly classified as actual gods, other polytheistic religions did have deities they worshipped behind closed doors. Finnish paganism played host to maan haltijas, which guarded property and livestock. Offerings were made at shrines to both thank the gods and appease them, and prayers could be made to make neighbours suffer by stealing wealth or making animals infertile. Haltijas were often the spirits of ancestors, usually the first person to have lived in that particular house. Meanwhile, the ancient Egyptian pantheon saw a few gods being worshipped in the home instead of in temples, which were the centre of urban Egyptian life. Like other religions in antiquity, ancestor worship played a huge role, while prayers and devotions to a couple of major deities - namely Bes and Taweret - were also considered important. The aim was to ensure the family remained in good health, with particular emphasis placed on fertility, pregnancy, birth and childhood. This isn’t a topic that is discussed much in Egyptology, partly because of a lack of hard evidence - only around 23 settlements have contained archaeological finds to do with household worship. However, what has been found includes altars, shrines, niches, amulets, statues and more. Everyday items like furniture, mirrors and knife handles were also often emblazoned with Bes’ image.

Naturally, the Egyptians weren't the only one to have major deities dedicated to hearth and home. Rome famously had Vesta, the goddess charged with heart, home and family, and she even claimed a place on the Dii Consentes, the 12 most revered Roman gods. The Greeks had her equivalent, Hestia, who received the first offering of any sacrifice taking place in the household. It was her role to represent domesticity, while Hermes played her counterpart by looking over business and the world outside the home.

Pre-Christian Lithuania's pantheon had Matka Gabia, a goddess of home, heart and care, often appearing as a woman in red or taking the form of a cat, stork or rooster. Her worship included offering her bread and salt, while those who stomped or spat on fire often found themselves as the mercy of her heated destruction. Norse polytheism has Frigg, the wife of Odin, the head of the pantheon. Champion of marriage and fertility, her name literally means 'beloved' in Old Norse, and she could have been considered a template for mothers to follow.

Of course, sometimes worship in the home wasn't anything to do with pagan or polytheistic religions. Many of today's religions have been around since antiquity – perhaps most famously Christianity, Judaism and Islam – and each has components that can be achieved from the comfort of one's home. Prayer can be a very private affair, sometimes taking place behind closed doors rather than in the public space of a sacred building or area. But sometimes worship at home was more out of fear for one's life than comfort. Christianity didn't enjoy the smoothest of starts, with spates of persecution taking place in the early days of the Roman Empire. In antiquity, worship in the home was something that couldn't be forgotten – thanking the spirits each day and appeasing them with sacrifices, offerings and prayers would see you get through the day, the year, perhaps your life, with (hopefully) little ill happening to you. In Rome, it would be preferable to forget to sacrifice to Vesta than to forget your Lares and Penates. However, except for in the case of the Romans, little is known about the rites and rituals that went along with household worship. It seems that for the most part, the personal side to religion, the side that saw family members looked after and pantries well stocked, will be staying behind those closed doors for a little longer.



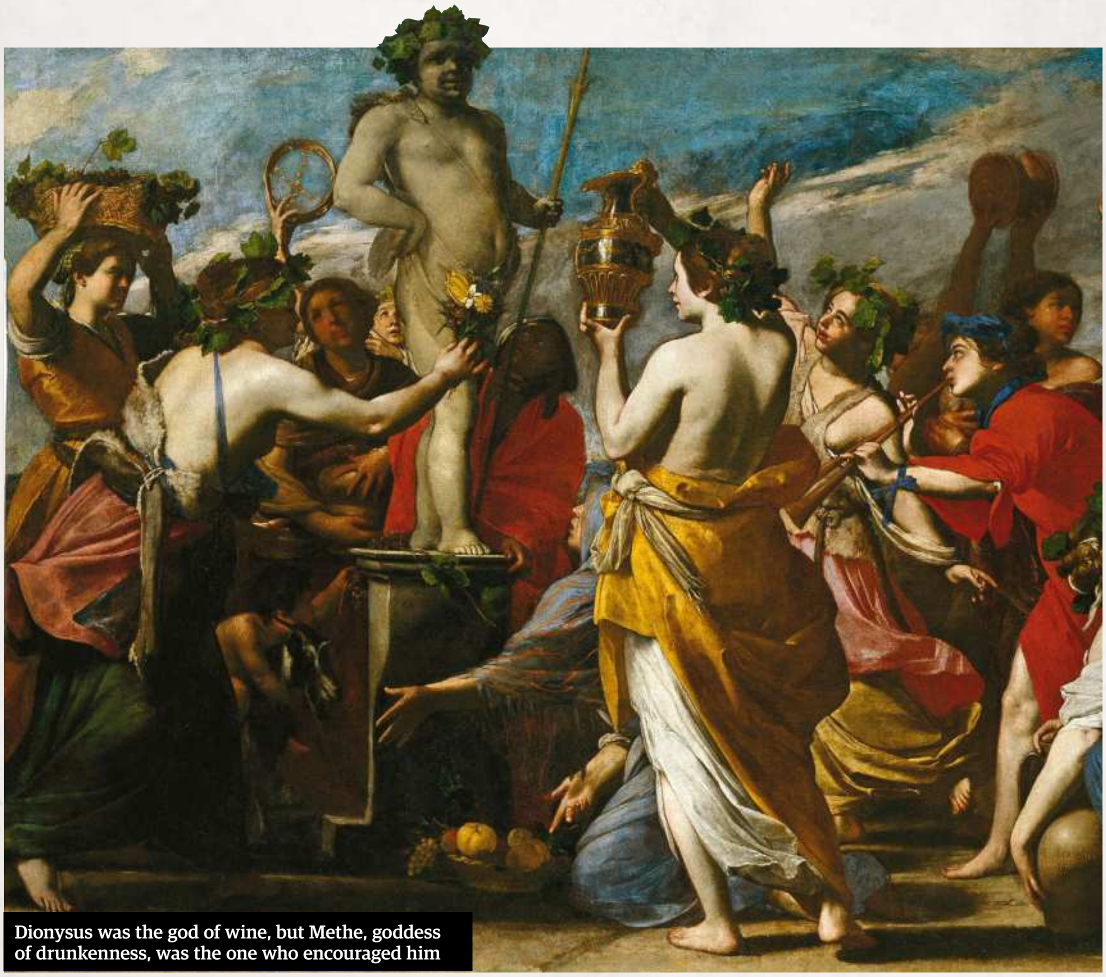
A household shrine in the House of the Menander in Pompeii, Italy, with votive statues

Image Credits: Getty Images

HISTORY'S STRANGEST GODS

THERE'S NO ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE IN MATTERS OF FAITH, AND POLYTHEIST PANTHEONS ACROSS THE WORLD HAVE INCLUDED THEIR FAIR SHARE OF BIZARRE DIVINITIES

WRITTEN BY: BEN GAZUR


Dionysus was the god of wine, but Methe, goddess of drunkenness, was the one who encouraged him

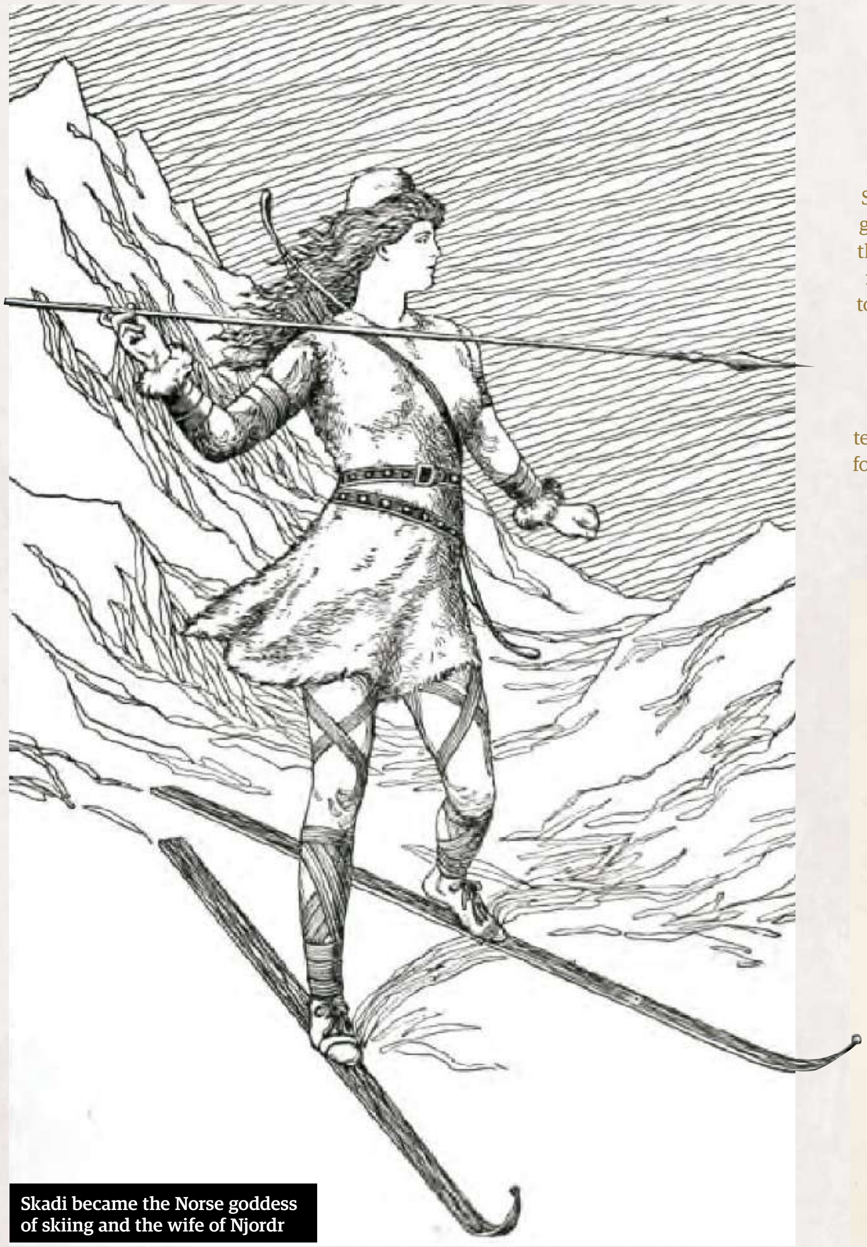
METHE

THE DEITY OF DRUNKENNESS WHO ATTENDED THE REVELS OF THE BIBULOUS DIONYSUS

Methe was the personification of the ancient Greek concept of drunkenness. The ancient Greeks may have loved wine but they mostly drank it heavily watered down so as not to attract the attention of this goddess. She was often mentioned as one of the attendants of Dionysus, god of wine and frenzy, but was listed among the pleasures that he could bring. One poet described how thanks to him "Methe [Drunkenness] was brought forth, Charis [Grace] was born, Lype [Pain] takes rest and Ania [Trouble] goes to sleep."

One story says that Methe was once a human whose husband died the morning after a long banquet held in honour of Dionysus. As recompense for his fatal hangover the god decreed that Methe would be forever honoured as Drunkenness.

Painters in the ancient world were particularly fond of creating images of Dionysus' revelry and the bizarre adventures that drunken deities can get into. Often Methe was shown pouring him yet another drink and driving the god still more wild.



Skadi became the Norse goddess of skiing and the wife of Njordr

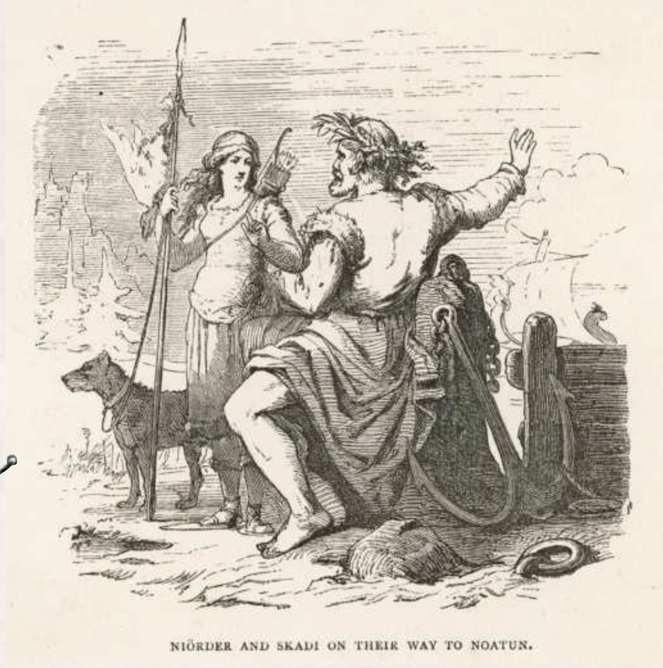
SKADI

THE NORSE GODDESS OF SKIING WHO HAD A WICKED SENSE OF HUMOUR

Skadi did not start her life as a goddess, but rather as one of the fearsome giants of Norse myth. When her father was killed by the gods she went to them for compensation for her loss and they offered her the hand of a god in marriage. There was only one catch before she got the hand - she had to pick her husband only by looking at their feet. Instead of the handsome Baldr, whom she planned to snare, she got the sea god Njordr.

Skadi accepted her new husband but would only vow not to take vengeance on the gods if they could make her laugh once. It was the trickster god Loki who rose to the challenge. Taking a rope he tied his testicles to a goat and each pulled hard against the other, squealing as they fought. When Loki eventually collapsed into Skadi's lap she finally let out a little laugh and peace was restored to Asgard once more.

As a new goddess Skadi was given her own domain to oversee. She received the wilderness, hunting, and skiing.



NIÖRDER AND SKADI ON THEIR WAY TO NOATUN.

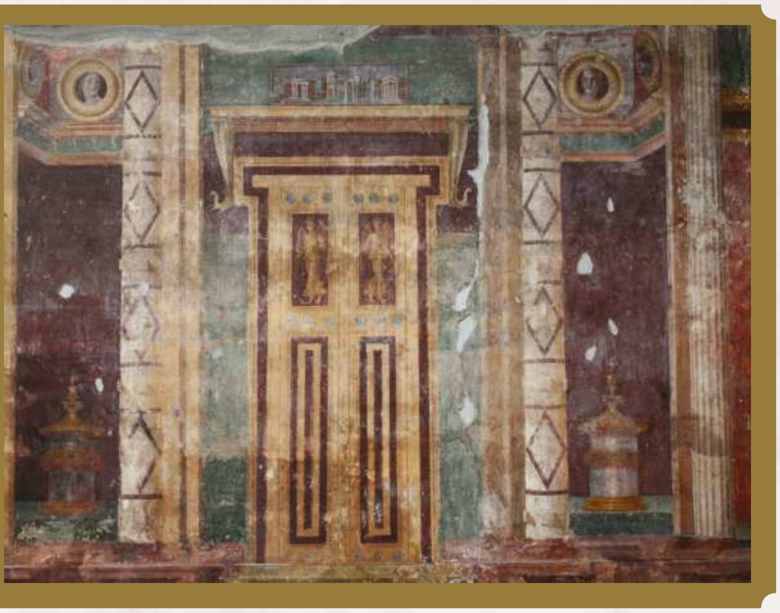
CARDEA

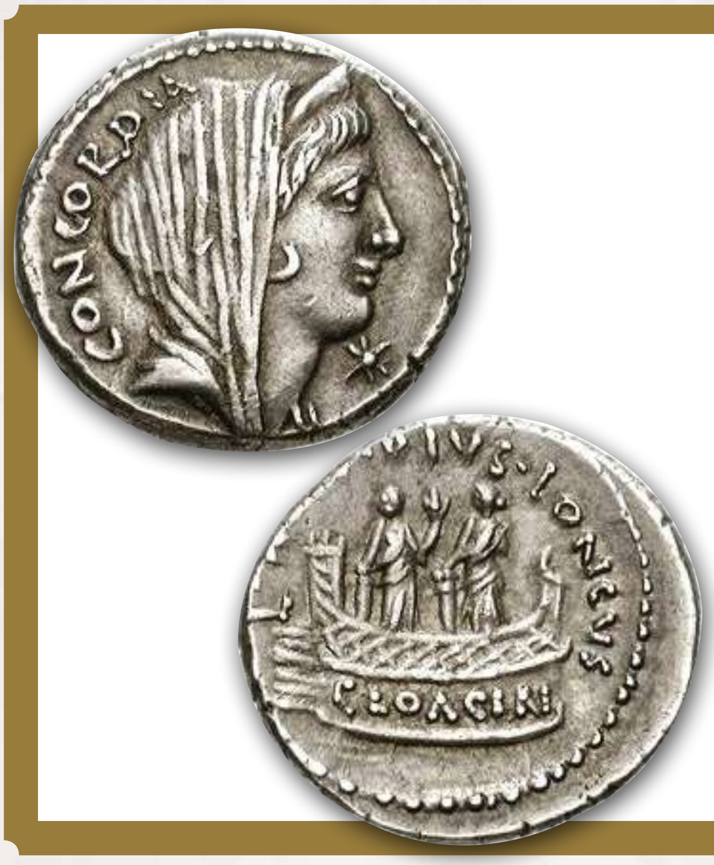
THE GODDESS OF HINGES COULD OPEN MANY DOORS TO WONDERS

Cardea, or Carna, was the Roman goddess who looked after hinges. According to the poet Ovid she was the beloved of the (literally) two-faced Janus and it was he who granted her dominion over hinges. With her new powers came the ability to ward off evil from doorways, and she was particularly invoked to keep demons away from children in a house.

We are told that children who had no nurses were at risk of being attacked in their cradles by huge, flesh-hungry birds. The goddess is said to have protected babies afflicted by their attacks with a rod of whitethorn.

Early Christian writers often mocked Cardea, and through her all polytheism, because she was a god of such small power. Saint Augustine asked how it was that the pagan gods needed three divinities to guard a door when a single human watchman would suffice? Alongside Cardea as watcher of hinges were Forculus, protector of doors, and Limentinus, god of thresholds.





CLOACINA

WHAT HAVE THE ROMANS EVER DONE FOR US? CLOACINA, GODDESS OF SEWERS, COULD TELL YOU

"O Cloacina, Goddess of this place,
Look on thy suppliants with a smiling face.
Soft, yet smooth let their offerings flow,
Neither rashly swift nor insolently slow."

This poem, attributed to Lord Byron, captures some of the flavour of the Roman goddess Cloacina. As a deity of cleansing she was responsible for keeping the Cloaca Maxima (Great Drain) of Rome running smoothly, carrying the sewage away from the heavily populated city. She was also a more personal goddess who protected sex within marriage and an individual's relationship with their toilet.

Originally an Etruscan god Cloacina came over time to be associated with the Roman goddess Venus, not an obvious pairing. There was a legend of a statue of Venus being found in the sewers of Rome, but the Romans may have simply seen a link between the ideas of filth, virtue, and the powers of cleansing. Many gods preside over polar opposites. In early Roman myth when the Romans and Sabines were about to battle they were stopped by the women they were fighting over and purified with myrtle branches at the very site that eventually became sacred to Cloacina.

Venus Cloacina became a major aspect of Venus and was celebrated with a shrine constructed directly over the Cloaca Maxima. The round shrine may even have had direct access to the sewer. It became so famous a holy site that it even featured on Roman coins, allowing us to visualise the shrine even though little remains today.

THE UNKNOWN GODS OF ATHENS

EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHO TO THANK IT STILL PAYS TO BE POLITE

"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.'"

These are the word of Saint Paul, according to the Book of Acts, when he went to Athens to convince them of the truth of his religion. But to the Athenians there was a very good reason to offer up prayers to gods they did not know.

It started with a man who took an unusually long nap. When Epimenides of Knossos felt tired while herding his sheep he went into a cave for a rest, not knowing it was sacred to Zeus. Instead of having 40 winks he slept for 57 years, but was rewarded with prophetic visions. When he later arrived at Athens his newfound wisdom came in handy.

A plague was raging through the city and for the Ancient Greeks that meant that a god was displeased with them. To remove the polluting sin from the city they had to know who to propitiate with a sacrifice. Epimenides came up with the answer. He released his sheep into the city and wherever they lay down he told the Athenians to set up a shrine to a god, known or unknown. In this way the gods, whoever they were, were pleased and the city saved.

SEI DEO SEI DEIVAE SAC

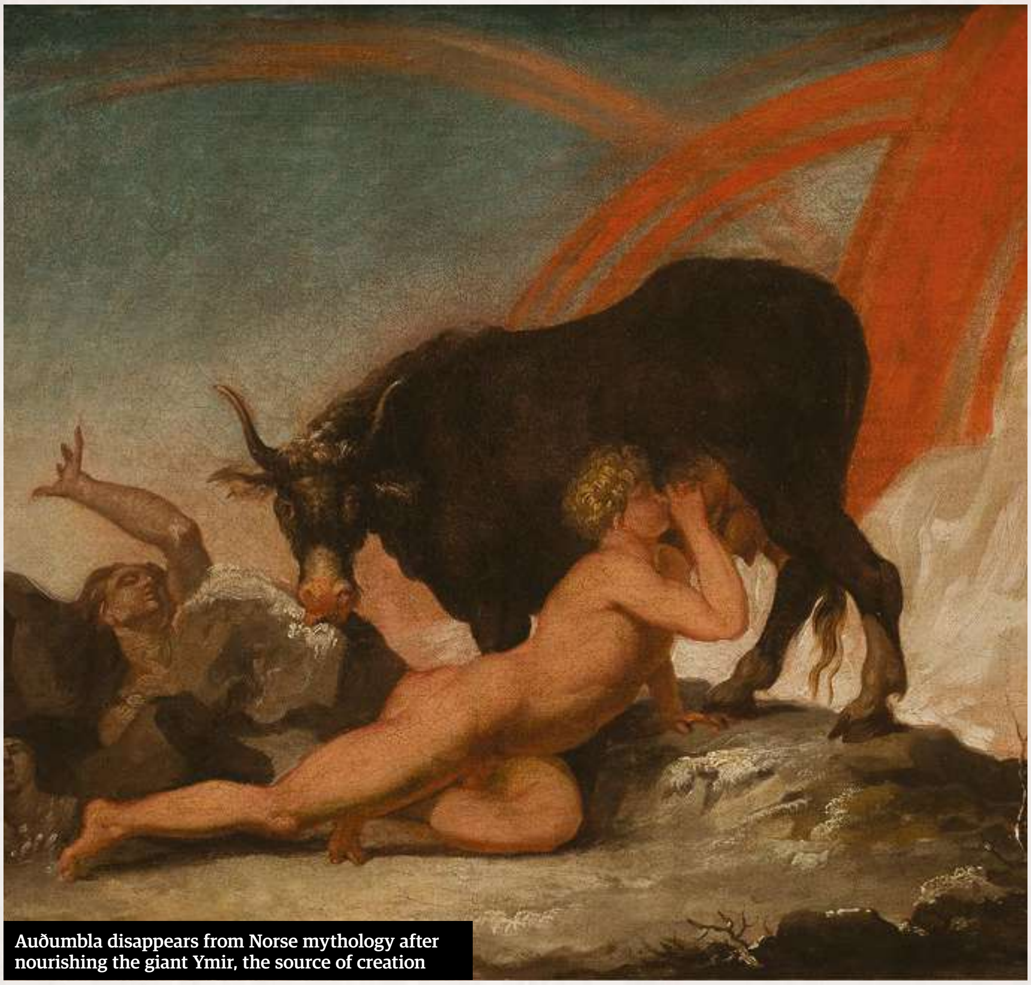
An Athenian shrine dedicated to 'the unknown god' who apparently eased a plague in the Greek city

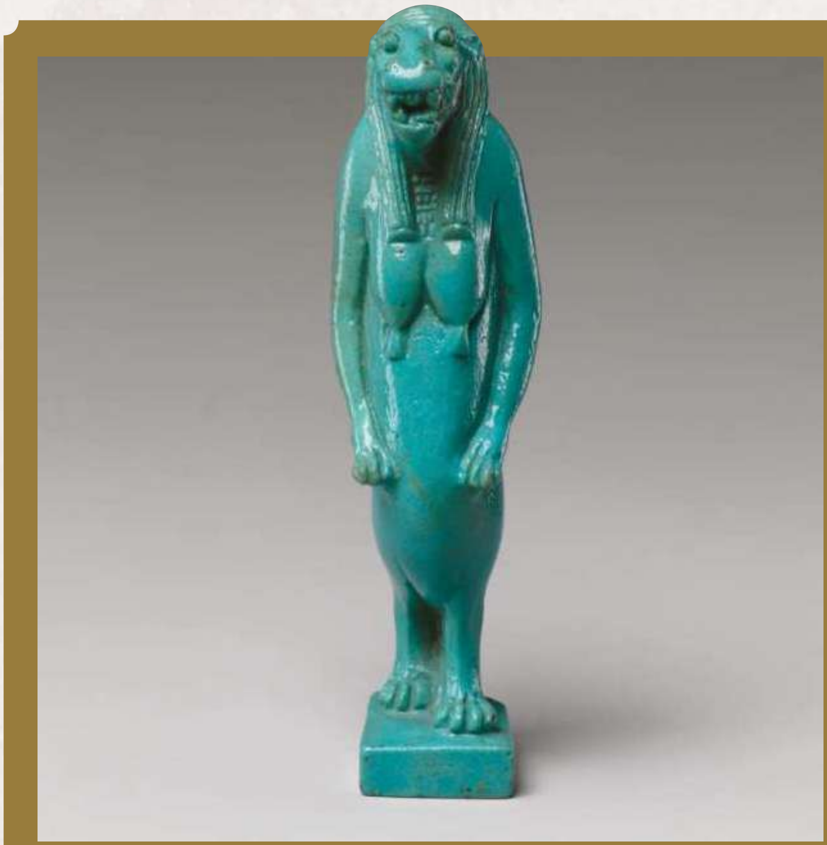
AUÐUMBLA

THE NORSE CREATION MYTH GIVES A STARRING ROLE TO A VERY IMPORTANT COW

According to Norse myth the world began in ice and fire. Between the realms of ice (Niflheim) and fire (Muspelheim) lay an abyss of nothingness. Over time the ice grew and sparks flew from the fires and came close together. The sparks formed the Sun, Moon, and stars, while the melting ice revealed the form of an ice giant called Ymir. The next creature to emerge from the ice was the cow Auðumbla. Auðumbla fed Ymir in this barren world, as from her udder flowed four mighty streams of milk. In a world of ice and fire there was not much grass for her to feed on, so Auðumbla herself derived nutrition from licking the salty ice around her. It was the action of her tongue that slowly liberated another deity from the blocks of ice. Buri, father of the familiar Æsir gods of the Norse, was licked entirely free over the course of three days.

It is thanks to Auðumbla then that the Earth exists. The sons of Buri, including Odin, slew Ymir and used his body to create the nine realms of Norse mythology. Ymir's eyebrows became Midgard where humans were destined to live, while his brains were set in the sky as clouds. What happened to Auðumbla after her part in the creation of the universe is not known, but it can be hoped that the gods gave her greener pastures for her service.


Auðumbla disappears from Norse mythology after nourishing the giant Ymir, the source of creation



TAWERET

THE FEARSOME PROTECTOR OF WOMEN AND CHILDBIRTH WHO MADE FOR AN ALARMING MIDWIFE

Most maternity wards would frown on Taweret joining their team. There is not much that is calming about a vast bipedal hippopotamus with the claws and hind legs of a lion, and the powerful tail of a crocodile doesn't exactly suggest she would make for a gentle midwife either. Taweret is a composite of three creatures that were among the most deadly for ancient Egyptians and yet she was the deity of choice for those facing the rigours of childbirth. It may be that since childbirth was such a trial in the ancient world that it was thought those who suffered through it needed the strongest possible protector. That's definitely Taweret.

Taweret is often found in the form of small amulets, which could be kept close during pregnancy to act as an apotropaic charm, one that wards away evil. She is sometimes shown as pregnant herself to increase the sympathetic connection between deity and devotee. With a mouth full of vicious-looking teeth it was a brave evil spirit who tried to claim the life of a woman or child under Taweret's protection.

Taweret did not act alone in her defence of the pregnant. Other deities like the lion-dwarf Bes were also evoked to keep evil at bay. Both of these gods were a common sight in Egyptian homes, where they were sometimes painted on walls to protect those inside. Many chose to honour Taweret by not referring to her by name but by using epithets such as 'Great One', 'Lady of Heaven', or 'Lady of the Birth House'.

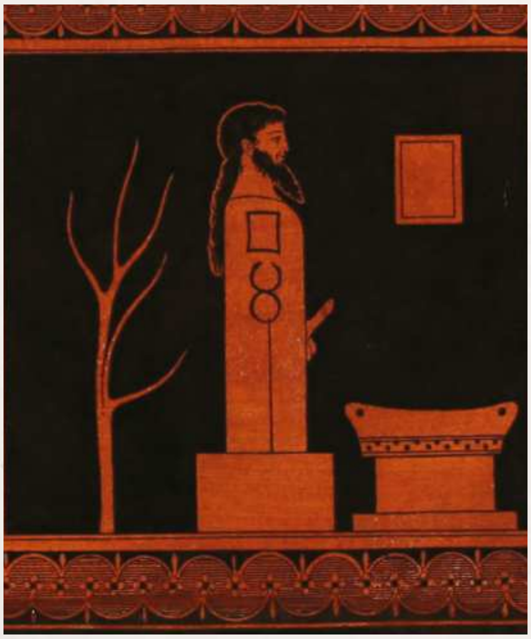
PRIAPUS

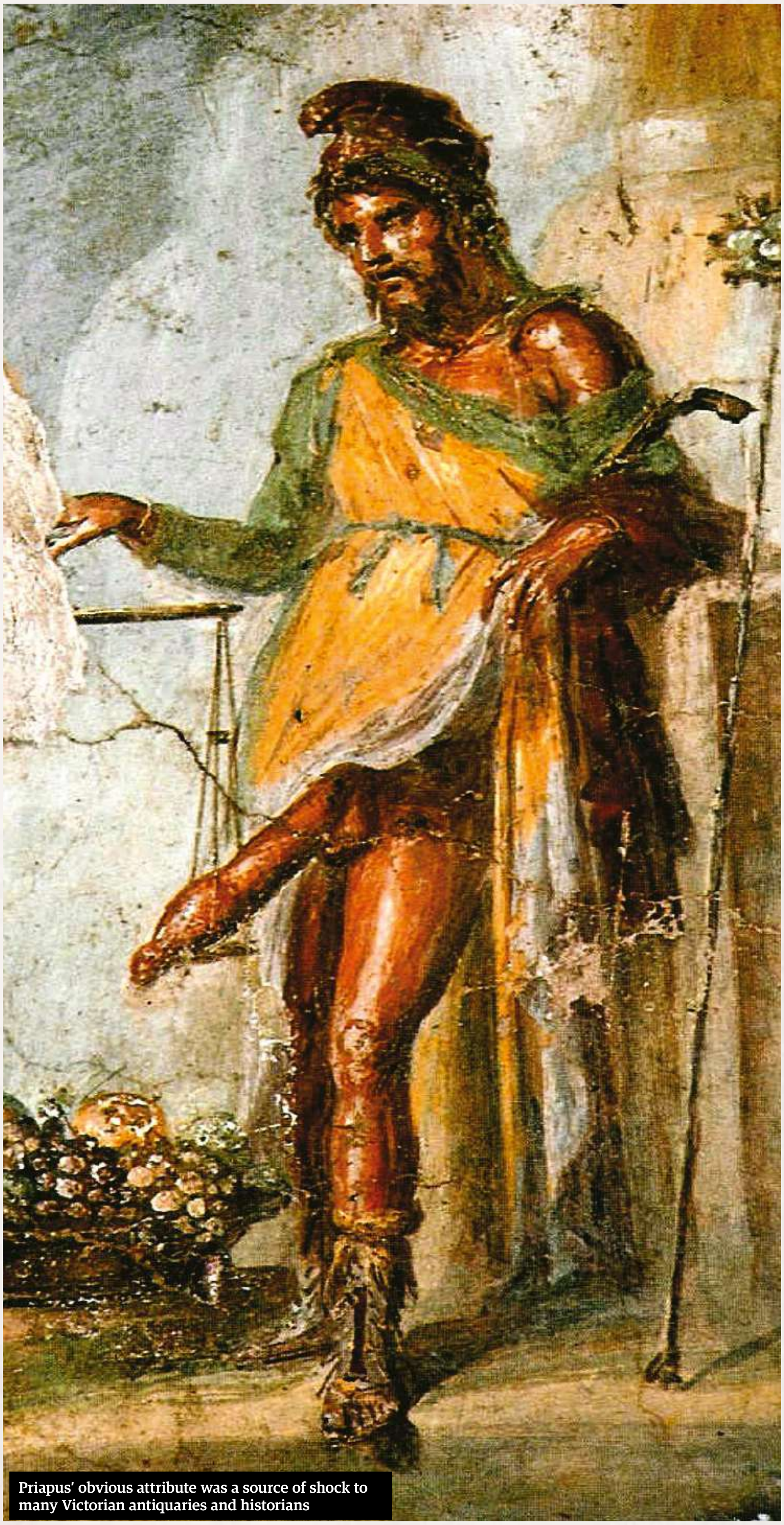
THE POTENT GOD WITH ONE DISTINCTIVE ATTRIBUTE THAT SHOCKS MANY

When one thinks of Ancient Rome it is often an elegant city decorated tastefully with stark white statues of flawless gods. In fact the ancient city was dirty, noisy, and gaudy. The white statues of today were once brilliantly painted and not all of the gods they depicted were suitable for all members of the family. One member of the pantheon in particular shocked modern collectors of antiquities when he came to light. Priapus, a fertility god and bringer of good fortune, caused extreme consternation by sporting an unwieldy and permanently erect penis. A god to both the Greeks and Romans, the image of Priapus would not have been quite so startling to an ancient audience. Both Athens and Rome had many phallic depictions on their streets. In Athens, statues called Herms, pillars with prominent phalluses, guarded the streets. In Rome, phallic good luck charms hung from doorways, necklaces, and shop signs. We cannot say exactly why the ancient mind associated the penis with fortune, but it was fairly ubiquitous across the Mediterranean.

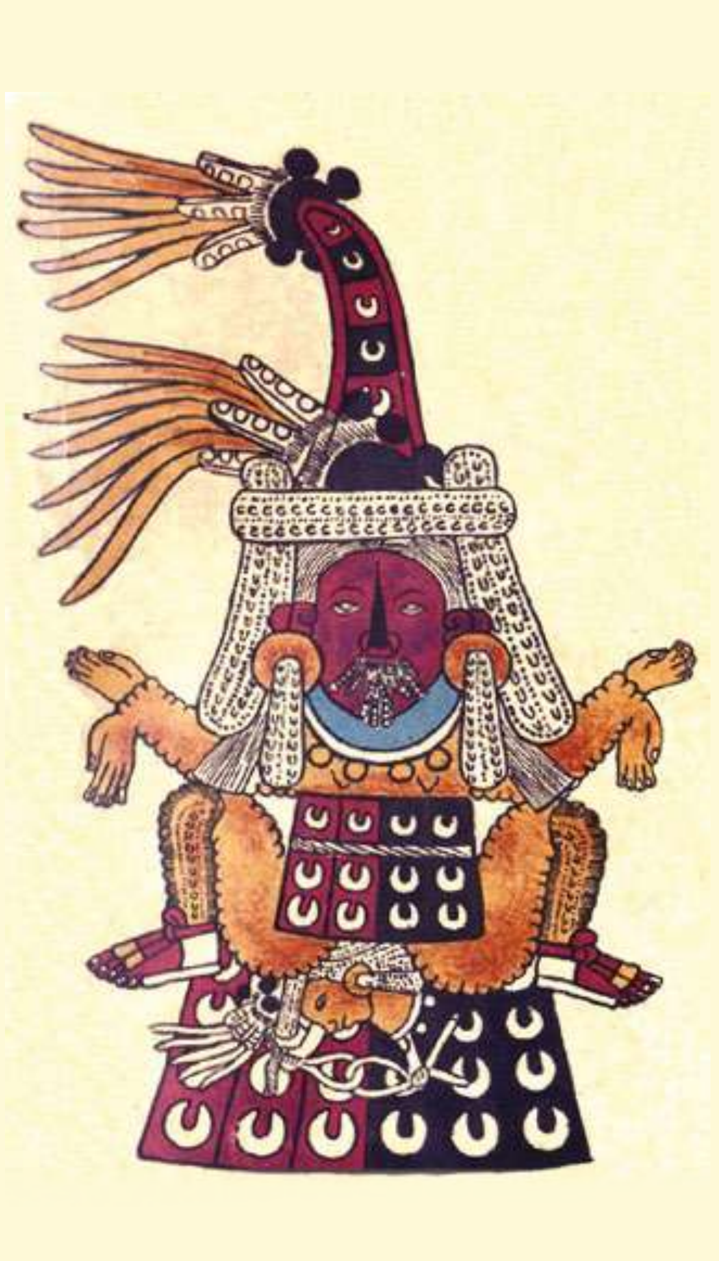
Priapus, or Mutanus Tutanus as the Romans sometimes called him, was often found in gardens or as a guardian of fields. The connection between his main attribute and fertility is an obvious one. The poet Virgil apologised to his idol of Priapus for his meagre offerings: "A bowl of milk, Priapus, and these cakes, are all you can expect year by year; the garden you watch is poor."

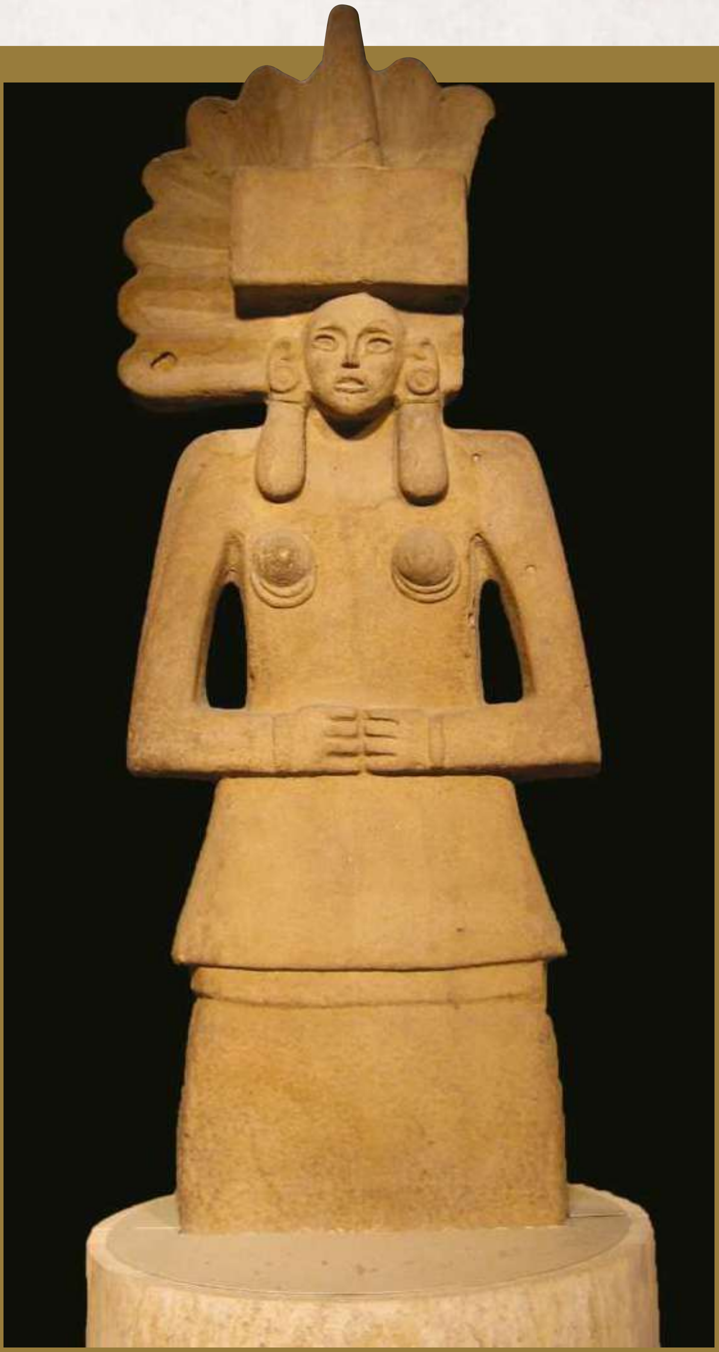
The ruins of Pompeii provided antiquities hunters with a rich crop of Priapic images. These were thought to be so shocking that for many years they were kept hidden. Frescoes with his image were boarded over and statues and charms locked in a 'Secret Cabinet' that only gentlemen scholars were permitted to peek at.





Priapus' obvious attribute was a source of shock to many Victorian antiquaries and historians





TLAZOLTEOTL

THE AZTEC GODDESS OF FILTH WHO CONSUMED DIRT TO CREATE CLEANLINESS

Tlazolteotl was the Aztec god set over many interesting aspects of human life. She was the god of fertility, sexuality, and waste. One of her tasks was to consume "tlazolli" - a word that meant rubbish, detritus, and even human waste. It was Tlazolteotl's job to eat all of this and by doing so convert it into more useful things. She took the disorder of the universe and its filth and left behind a more beautiful world. Perhaps because of her unsanitary eating habits, Tlazolteotl was also the goddess of steam baths, which she might need after a hard day's work. Tlazolteotl's statues and images are often disconcerting. One famous image shows her in the moment of giving birth. The god who falls from her, or seems to be launched away from her, is Centeotl, the god of maize. This shows Tlazolteotl's role in the cycle of life and death. Through her eating of waste she creates the rich soil that allows plants to grow and nourish people.

Tlazolteotl literally means 'God of Dirt' but she was also known as Tlahelcuani - "she who eats dirt [sin]". Her statues were sometimes smeared with bitumen around the mouth to show how she consumed the blackness of people's sins. As the goddess of illicit love she had the power to forgive you for your own particular sins - but only once. Most people who asked her forgiveness waited until they were elderly and most of their lecherous activities were behind them. She was therefore a goddess not only of filth but also of purification. Sometimes she is shown with cotton and spindles hanging from her head, suggesting a role in weaving. This further points to her role in regeneration. Just as she takes the disordered filth into herself and transforms it into useful things, so she takes the mess of cotton and spins it into useful thread.

GLYCON

THE SNAKE WITH A HEAD OF HAIR MAY HAVE BEEN LESS THAN HE SEEMED...

In around 160 CE, Alexander of Abonutichus strode into a marketplace, naked except for a golden loincloth, and announced to his fellow citizens that a god was about to appear. He rushed off to the building site of a temple with the throng in tow, and found in a pool of water there, an egg. Cracking it open, a tiny snake came forth. Glycon the god had arrived!

According to Lucian of Samosata, however, this was only the final step in a plan Alexander had been cooking up for a while. He had placed the egg in the water the night before. He had used a tiny hole to blow out the contents of a goose egg and placed an infant snake inside before sealing it with wax. To the credulous audience, however, the arrival of Glycon was a true miracle.

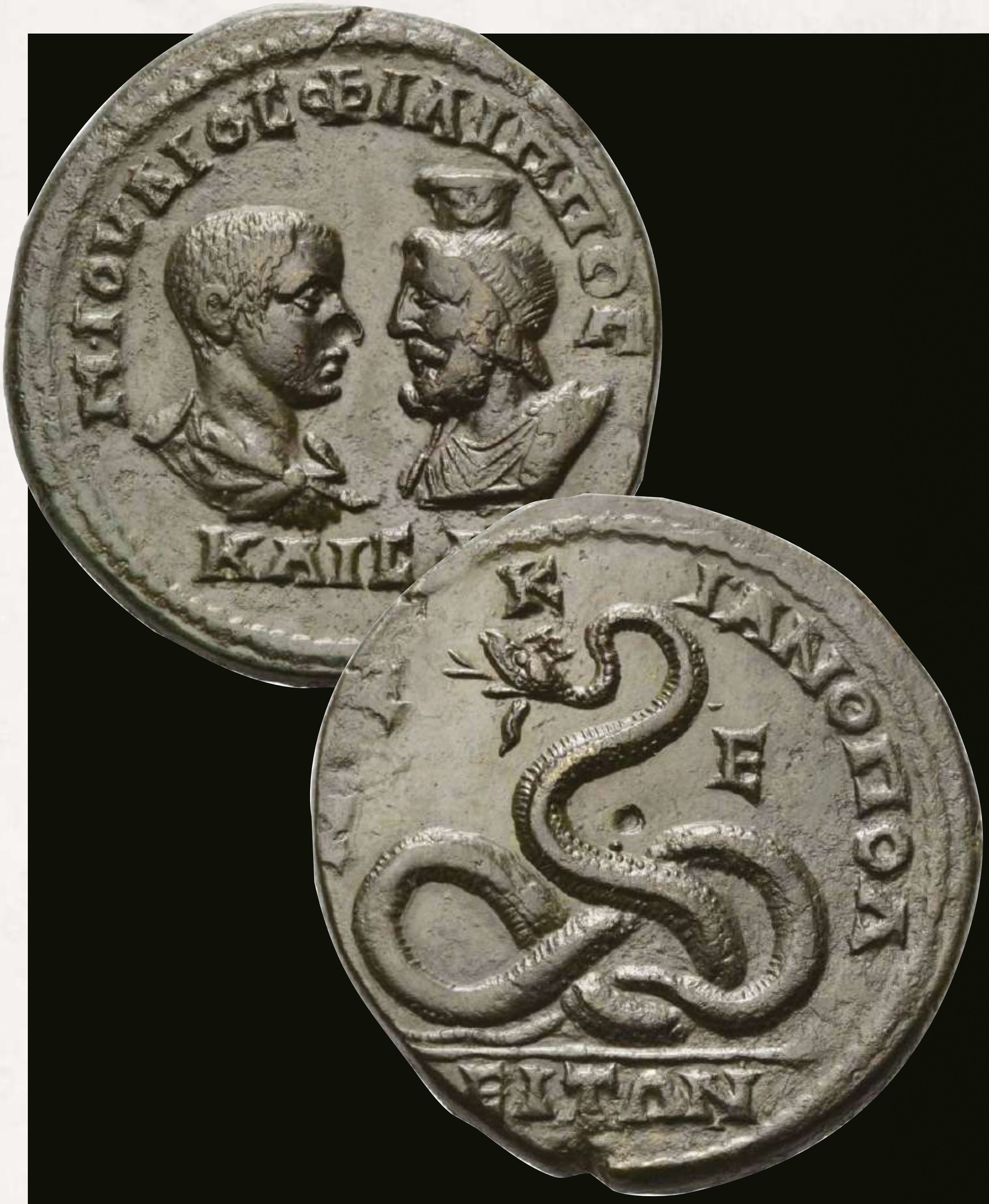
Glycon soon grew. Within a week he was the size of a man and, unlike most snakes, had a wonderful mess of bouffant hair on his head. People flocked to see him. Glycon and Alexander only allowed their visitors to observe the god in a room with little light. There the huge snake would open and shut its mouth and Alexander would interpret the god's messages.

> “NOT EVERYONE BELIEVED HE WAS REALLY A GOD”

Not everyone believed Glycon was really a god, but enough did that Alexander was soon receiving large amounts of money for the oracles he heard from the holy snake. Despite people like Lucian saying that Glycon was merely a puppet operated by acolytes who moved his mouth with a wire, worship of the god spread. As the son of Asclepius, god of medicine, Glycon was often called on in matters of healing. Inscriptions have been found entreating him, “Glycon protect us from the plague-cloud”.

Snakes had long been held to have magical powers relating to rejuvenation as they cast off their old skins and seemed to be reborn. Glycon the snake found popularity with both the lower classes and the ruling elite. The Roman governor of Asia declared himself to be the protector of Glycon's oracle. Roman coins were struck with the image of Glycon on them – sometimes showing the god now with a flowing beard as well.

After the death of Alexander, Glycon worship continued for several centuries, but never quite recaptured its former glory. Glycon faded from history, leaving behind only his glorious image for us to marvel at.



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According to his 'discoverer', stylish snake Glycon was the son of the healing god Asclepius

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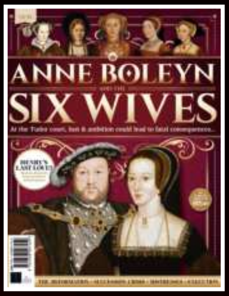
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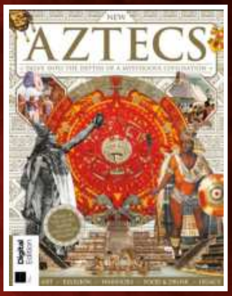

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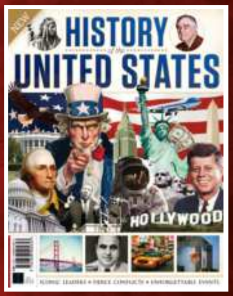
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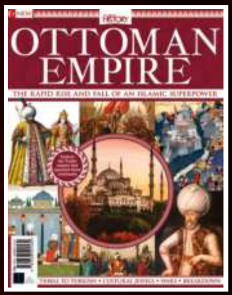
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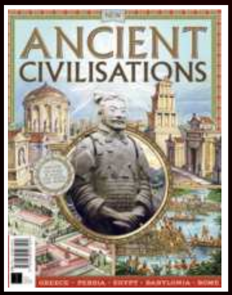
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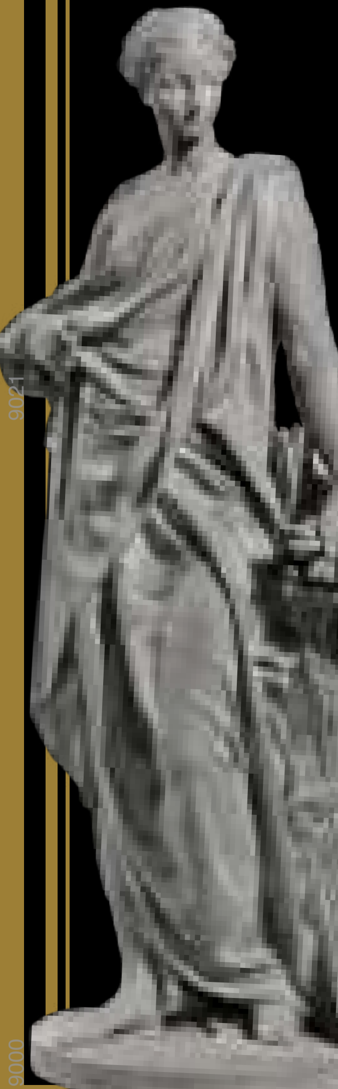

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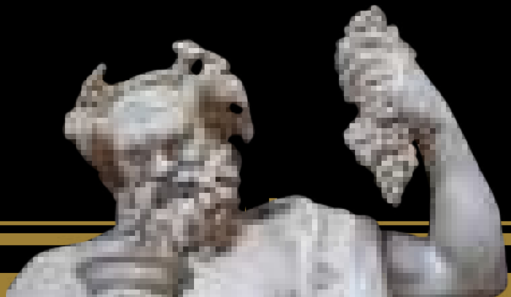

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